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THE SILENCE OF SEBASTIAN

BY ANNA T. SADLIER

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BY

ANNA T. SADLIER

Author of "Phileas Fogg, Attorney," etc.



THE AVE MARIA
NOTRE DAME, INDIANA
U. S. A.

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THE SILENCE OF SEBASTIAN

I.

SEBASTIAN was the youngest save one of the Wilmot family,—a straight-browed, dark-haired and dark-complexioned young man, who at twenty-eight had all those qualities with which men of forty are usually credited. He had matured early,—too early, if the old axiom be correct, that fruit ripening most slowly is the soundest and sweetest. After having gone through his college course in a manner to satisfy the most exacting father, he had entered mercantile life, under the auspices of the latter gentleman.

His entrance upon that career, to which he devoted all his faculties, went far to console his paternal relative for the disappointment occasioned by the two elder brothers, Alfred and Louis, who had unhesitatingly pronounced in favor of the professions. The former had obtained a solid footing amongst the legal fraternity, while Louis was engaged in building up a medical practice in the populous East End. And, having thus cut themselves off

from the paternal commercialism, each had likewise his separate establishment. Alfred had made what was considered by his parents a thoroughly satisfactory marriage; while Louis, with the assistance of an old housekeeper who had also been nurse in the family, had set up housekeeping for himself in a modest brick dwelling, in that portion of the city where his practice mostly lay—a cross street adjoining Second Avenue.

Sebastian remained at home, in the dwelling on Gramercy Park, which had once been a mansion dating back to more primitive times, but which the elder Wilmot had purchased at a comparatively modest figure. A considerable amount of money had been expended upon it in the shape of embellishments or improvements; but it had been permitted to retain its oldtime stateliness and dignity, even though the neighborhood thereabout had degenerated. David Wilmot liked the dignity, but was quite indifferent to those circumstances which sorely vexed the minds of his wife and daughter—namely, that business under various forms had reared its head all about, and the most undesirable purlieus were in tolerably close proximity.

“Sebastian,” came the father’s deep-toned voice at the foot of the broad stairway,—
“Sebastian, come at once! I am waiting for you.”

Sebastian, dressed in his faultlessly neat

business suit of iron-gray, emerged from the room he was occupying near the top of the first stairs; and, hastening down the broad staircase, rejoined his father in the hall below. Standing together, they formed something of a contrast. The elder man had grown ponderous in the course of the years, though there were some who remembered him just such a straight and agile figure as Sebastian. His face was of a dark purplish hue, his prominent nose veined, and his manner at times choleric.

"Sebastian," he said, "you make a mistake in being dilatory. Promptitude is the soul of business."

The young man made no reply, and the two descended the steps, where the trim brougham waited, which transported them, with but slight delay, to the emporium on Broad Street. It was a five-story building, grim and forbidding in aspect, and would have been a monotone in gray but for the blue shades that veiled all the windows. On each of its five stories was carried on one branch or another of that colossal industry, the importation and, when occasion demanded, the exportation of dry-goods.

Sebastian occupied an office on the second story, adjoining that of his father; but smaller, less luxurious, and altogether less imposing than that of the senior partner. The junior, however, had mastered, by careful and painstaking diligence, every detail of the business; and in the smaller rather than in the larger office were

to be found the virile directness, the unswerving rectitude, and the capacity which had given the firm its present exalted standing. He had even guided it through a commercial crisis which had wrecked many firms of older standing; steering his way through the intricacies of modern finance which simply bewildered his father. To the firm name of D. Wilmot had lately been added "& Son,"—a tacit acknowledgment of the influence which Sebastian had exerted upon its present-day destinies.

In truth, such a hand as his was sorely needed; for not only had mercantile conditions altered since David laid the foundations of his prosperity, but a trusted clerk and confidential adviser had died recently, and left the head of the concern floundering and uncertain but for the timely advent upon the scene of the young Hercules of commerce. Sebastian's power was all the greater because, though he knew and fully realized it himself, he gave no sign, and those upon whose behalf it was employed were but dimly conscious of its existence.

That day was like any other day at the place of business. Orders came in and orders went out, negotiations were set on foot or negotiations were carried out, which meant an addition of thousands of dollars to the exchequer of Wilmot & Son. For the commodities in which the house traded included whole shiploads of merchandise, cargoes of the richest

stuffs; and it had its agents in Mexico, in South America, and in the leading cities of the United States and Canada. Its operations, in fact, swept the continent, and extended into the old countries of Europe, Asia, and even Africa.

Sebastian had received that day visits from scores of business men, all marked more or less by the hurry and stress of modern conditions; all, or nearly all, in a hurry; all, or nearly all, making use of sharp, disjointed sentences, and of trite commercial phrases. Also the many calls to which the junior partner responded at his private telephone might well have occasioned both weariness and disgust. But Sebastian showed no signs of either, appearing as trim, as neat, as capable as ever, when the day wore on to late afternoon.

He allowed himself a breathing space from inflexible duty as the sun of that lovely day in early October showed signs of sinking to its rest. Raising the blue shade higher, he looked out upon that portion of New York which came under his observation,—mostly warehouses, and buildings. He followed with his eye a soft and fleecy cumulus dividing the misty, amber-colored horizon from the arch of clear blue. And, so doing, his thoughts sped away to the seacoast where his mother and his only sister, Margie, were still lingering. A smile crossed his face and enlivened its gravity as he remembered his sister's enthusiastic praise

of their summer sojourn, — of the long stretches of white beach, of the thunder of the waves, and of the freshness of the saline atmosphere. Something of wistfulness crept into Sebastian's gaze at the picture thus conjured up; for he was passionately fond of Nature, and especially of the sea. He recalled quite gratefully, too, as if it had been a substantial advantage, Margie's yearning words: "If only you and father could be here it would be perfect!" Well, in so far as he was concerned, that wish had been all summer an impossibility; but he was glad, sincerely glad, that those dear women had not been denied the "splendor of the grass, the glory of the flower," and the various delights of a sojourn beside the sea.

He was startled from his reverie when his father, somewhat earlier than usual, came to the office door to ask if he was ready to leave. The young man responded that he was; and having resumed his outdoor habiliments, followed his father to the carriage. The latter, sinking back against the cushions, observed:

"It has been a long day!"

Sebastian looked at the speaker in surprise. It was so seldom he ever complained of fatigue.

II.

As the two men drove up town together, the elder, following out some train of thought in his own mind, remarked:

"There would have been room and to spare in this big concern for Alfred and Louis both."

Sebastian turned his dark eyes inquiringly upon his father.

"I suppose there would," he responded.

"Suppose? Why, I'm sure of it! Our trade has gone on increasing every day in the last few years. We have nearly doubled our connections."

Sebastian may have been tempted to remark that this period of alleged increase coincided with his own advent into the firm. But, if such a suggestion occurred to him, he gave no outward sign.

"There is room," continued the father, his tone growing in emphasis, "for half a dozen capable men at the head of affairs."

"I am not so sure of that, father," dissented Sebastian. "I think there can be only one man really at the head of affairs."

His father looked inquiringly, pondering in his own mind as to whether or not this obser-

vation was to be interpreted in a sense complimentary to himself. Having decided in the affirmative, he agreed with some complacency:

“Yes, I believe you are right.”

“The rest,” added Sebastian, “are merely subordinates.”

“Of course,—of course!” assented David Wilmot, ruffling his plumes. “Still I can’t help regretting that Alfred and Louis are not with us.”

“They could no doubt have been made useful,” acceded Sebastian, wondering if it were intolerable presumption in himself to believe that he—he and his father, of course,—could do better without them.

“Both trustworthy, capable fellows,” declared the father, “especially Louis. A fine business man was lost in him.”

Sebastian smiled. He remembered to have heard some of his acquaintances express the opinion that an admirable member of one of the professions was lost when he himself had been sucked into the whirlpool of commercialism. Who could prophesy thus with certainty, or predicate on the chances of a life reversed! Or was it not probable, he thought, that the innate qualities of a man must be brought out in whatever career he has chosen, or into which he has been propelled by circumstances? His father did not see the smile, but continued to enlarge upon the subject which, apparently,

had taken so strong a hold upon his mind that day.

"As a man grows old," he said, "he likes to feel his sons as natural props supporting him."

Sebastian, who had relapsed into silence, leaning back against the luxurious cushions of the brougham—which, by the way, was the first indulgence he had permitted himself that day,—felt tempted to smile once more; for he found a ridiculous incongruity, somehow, in the thought of Alfred as a prop,—Alfred, who was himself, like some parasitic plant, supported entirely by the strength of his wife! It amused him to imagine, for instance, how Alfred would have comported himself in presence of a difficult negotiation which had been that afternoon referred from the senior partner to himself. And as for Louis—well, he was more difficult to understand. It surprised him that his father should have reversed the judgment of the other members of the family, and have referred to the medical Louis, and not to the legal Alfred, as the better business man of the two. It dawned upon Sebastian then, if it had never done so before, that *he* was the real head of the concern. The knowledge thrilled him with a sense of power, of exhilaration, but also with a sentiment of deep pity for his father, who, never intellectually strong, had been long out-grown by a business which, for many years, had been carried upon the shoulders of a subor-

dinate; and who now, in the weakness of advancing age, was looking around for support.

"It would really pay Alfred to give up his law practice," resumed the elder man.

This was an extremely disquieting suggestion to Sebastian. Alfred, as the elder brother, must enter the firm, if enter he did, as superior to himself; and what endless mistakes, what work half done, what compromise, what futility, would be the results! He did not, however, put these thoughts into words. He had learned the power of silence.

"Louis is, I think, devoted to his profession," David Wilmot remarked doubtfully; and it was significant that both the speaker and listener felt uncertain as to the precise capabilities and inclinations of the second son.

"It is not that I undervalue you," declared the father, laying his hand with unwonted demonstrativeness upon Sebastian's arm; for the latter's silence at that moment had appeared to him as possibly resentful. "Oh, no, far from it! I depend upon you so much that I feel as if, with your brothers in the firm, we could do almost anything. You know I believe in concentration."

"So do I," agreed Sebastian. "I believe in it entirely."

This ready assent was puzzling to the father, as well it might be; since the meaning attached to the word "concentration" by his son was entirely different from his own.

"Concentration is strength," observed the elder man.

"It is everything," replied the younger.

"So that it seems to me that all the energies or talents of any sort that are in a family should be directed to the one end of building up and sustaining such a concern as Wilmot & Son."

"In spite of the proverb about putting all the eggs into one basket," said Sebastian, with a laugh that grated upon his father's ears; for he divined therein opposition to his pet idea.

"You're a strange fellow!" exclaimed his father, after a pause.

"Every one is really strange to every one else," replied Sebastian.

"I mean to say that you're different from the rest."

"It would be monotonous if we were all of a piece," smiled the younger man.

"I wonder how things will be," the father said next, in the manner of one thinking aloud, "when you come to marry? And it is not such a remote contingency, since it usually happens to most men even before your age."

"Do you mean, father," Sebastian asked, with some curiosity, "that I shall be strange in that relation?"

"I mean that you'll probably find it hard enough to meet a young woman suited to your taste, and who will be grave and serious-minded."

"Why, father," cried Sebastian, laughing outright, "my wife will not have to be admitted into the firm! Surely she need not be weighted down with gravity."

"I don't think," said the father, "that you will want a butterfly."

"I have no present use for one," Sebastian agreed.

"But I *am* tolerably sure you will marry."

"It is hard to be sure of anything," said Sebastian,— "that is, as far as the experience of twenty-eight goes. But if matrimony befalls most men, as you remark, why, there is every chance that it will strike me, too."

He saw the humor of the suggestion that had been in his father's tone—of matrimony in the light of a catastrophe, or at least a grim necessity,—and he wondered, as he had often wondered before, if this view of the matter arose from a certain incongruity which he had unwillingly recognized between his parents. Though his attitude, inward as well as outward, had always been scrupulously filial, Sebastian, who was clear-sighted, could not help wondering at times if David Wilmot had not found his matrimonial concerns, like that of the business, beyond him. For there was the wife, impulsive, emotional, and in various respects, different; and there was the husband, who seemed forever striving to keep up with her; so that while, in his portentous respectability and prosperity, he had been

ostensibly the head of the house and a commander whose dictates were final, there was forever in the background, to the keen mind of the young observer, something in his father's attitude that savored of fear.

"Whatever you do," cried the father, in a tone that fitted in oddly with the other's reflections, "have a care when it comes to matrimony! For that, more than anything else, makes or mars a man."

Trite as the advice might seem, it set Sebastian wondering more than ever if there had not been something that approached the tragic in an apparently commonplace situation. And yet he felt quite assured that his father had been sincerely devoted to his mother; while she, in her own fashion, had reciprocated the attachment.

There was a considerable silence, after which David Wilmot, still following the course of his own thoughts, began:

"There are your mother and sister."

Sebastian's face brightened. His mother and sister constituted for him the more joyous side of life. He was uncommonly devoted to them both.

"If anything should happen to me," the elder man continued, with the air of one discussing a remote contingency—"and in the course of nature that may be expected, say in a decade or so,—you will have the additional burden laid upon you of regulating their re-

spective shares of the estate. I have endeavored so to arrange matters (without interfering with the business) that in due time they may get their full share of the income as it stands, and the natural increment which, under judicious management, the concern may be expected to yield."

"Why, father," cried Sebastian, with a new note of feeling in his voice, "that is surely looking far ahead! I shall have plenty of time before then to become accustomed to my responsibilities."

"Very true," said the father; "but it is precisely by looking far ahead and trying to smooth out complications, that trouble may be avoided. That fact has been strongly borne in upon me during these last days." And he presently added, turning his face to the carriage window, so that it was concealed from his son: "There are matters to be settled that may offer a good deal of difficulty. I need not explain their nature, since I expect to deal with them myself without delay, so that future trouble may be avoided. But, in case of an emergency, I put these things into your hand. You've got a clear head, a strong will, and, I think, an upright conscience. And talking of that," he said, in the same low, troubled voice, "I'm afraid I have done little or nothing in that direction, beyond sending you to a college where those kind of things are looked after. Yet, my son, religion is a great

thing. Talk of business acumen, of smartness, of anything you like! They're not 'in it' with religion and conscience."

Sebastian listened in amazement, since from his earliest childhood he had never known his father to address a word upon that subject to himself or to any member of the family. And it was common knowledge—glossed over as well as possible by the mother, who was at least a practical Catholic—that David Wilmot never attended church even on Sundays, nor, so far as was known, approached the Sacraments. His pronouncement was, therefore, all the more impressive; though the voice in which it was made seemed thick and indistinct, and was presently drowned by the rumble of wheels and the roar of traffic that attended their entrance upon a thoroughfare. The two, in fact, fell into a silence that lasted until the vehicle in which they sat had passed through that portion of New York where one mighty emporium of trade seems to jostle another.

Sebastian read the familiar signs upon those buildings, as he had done countless times before, driving thus with his father in this slow and conservative equipage, which David Wilmot was obstinate in preferring to a motor. The young man's eyes wandered thence to the sun, which was approaching its setting,—blazing no longer with the fire of noonday, but grave and shadowed. He seemed to trace

something ominous in that splendor, which already gave token of departure.

Just before the carriage reached the Wilmot dwelling, Sebastian inquired, with a shade of anxiety in his tone:

"I hope you don't feel any worse than usual to-day, father?"

"No—no—I can't say that I feel much worse—nothing to speak of; only the weather strikes me as being rather oppressive for the season."

"I think," commented Sebastian, "that it would have been wiser if you had taken my advice and gone to join mother and Margie at the sea, even for a few weeks."

"Too much responsibility to leave upon you," objected the father. "And there's just a case in point: if your brothers had been with you, I should have gone."

Sebastian made no further remark, but at the foot of the steps offered his arm to his father, who accepted the support without protest, leaning upon it rather heavily. The young man admitted his father to the house, after which he stood still a moment and let his eyes rest upon the greenness of the square just opposite the dwelling, with a sudden and passionate wish for the beauty and joy of living, and an existence which embraced other elements than those that bound him to the office. And yet not for worlds would he have relinquished that weapon, which the colossal

fabric of Wilmot & Son had made ready to his hand, for attaining the pinnacle of his ambition.

As he looked, white butterflies, first one, then another, flitted past.

"I thought their day was done long ago," Sebastian said to himself. "It must be the unusual heat that has kept them alive so long."

And, standing thus at the top of the brown stone steps, he watched them with a curious fascination. The thought flashed into his mind of the hint thrown out by his father regarding a butterfly. He smiled, since the idea was not unwelcome. Woman had so far been associated in his mind with what was most pleasant; and why should she not be, later, the epitome, as it were, of air and sunshine,—a soft, white, gentle being, who, like these insects, might flit across his daily path without penetrating to its depths? It would be pleasant to have some one upon whom to lavish those spoils which he hoped to gather in yet greater abundance; some one who might be clothed in rich attire, if such were her pleasure, and, loving and beloved, be kept aloof from the wearisome details of that daily grind which was endurable, even necessary,—the hard, recurrent strokes by which man carves out his destiny.

Still smiling, he followed his father into the deserted house. How purposeless and dreary it appeared, under the guardianship of a manservant, who acted as factotum while the

others were away at the sea with their mistress. After a long day's work, Sebastian always felt that he hated men. When the day had been particularly trying, he usually gave himself up, when they were there, to the chatter of his mother and sister, or other female relatives, even when the subjects chosen chanced to be of the most frivolous.

III.

SEBASTIAN found it hard to sleep that night, though he was habitually a good sleeper; for mind and body were usually exhausted by the hard labors of the day. The conversation with his father had somewhat disturbed him. As the hours of darkness wore on, toward the breaking of day he felt an impalpable something of unrest, an overpowering heaviness in the atmosphere. Once he got up softly and went in the direction of his father's sleeping apartment. He was not there, but a trail of light from under the door showed that he was in a small, adjoining chamber which he used as a study. By an unaccountable feeling, Sebastian was led to tap at the door; and, opening it slightly, perceived his father, still dressed, and writing at a table which was strewn thickly with papers. He looked up sharply at his son, and, by an involuntary movement, placed his hand over a sheet of paper upon which he had been writing. To Sebastian's inquiry as to whether he was well, he answered, somewhat irritably, that he was; and Sebastian, divining that his presence was unwelcome, after a moment's hesitation, with-

drew. He had gone only a few steps, however, when his father called after him:

“Good-night, my boy!”

“Good-night, father!” said the son. “You should try to get some rest.”

“Presently I shall,” replied the father.

Sebastian, on returning to his own room, sat down near the window for a breath of fresh air. The crescent of a waning moon was dying out of a heaven filled with stars, and there was a fresh breeze blowing over the Park. That enclosure, pale and shadowy in the moonlight, was touched with something ghostly and ethereal,—a weirdness that appealed to the imaginative side of the observer’s character. He would have liked to dress, and go down there, into the freshness and silence; or, still better, to plunge into the ordinary business of the day, so intensely wide-awake and alert did he now feel; for within his own apartment there rested a shadow, by which he was oppressed and disquieted.

He sat in an armchair beside the window and watched the moon sink out of the sky, like a life that is spent. He marvelled at the quiet of the city, the throbbing of its arteries stilled. He felt as if he were waiting for something. Gradually the darkness melted; object after object became visible with a strange effect of familiarity, like old acquaintances reappearing after an absence. The leaves of the trees showed white in the first faint breeze

of the dawn, and pale streaks likewise appeared against the grayness of the horizon. They grew and intensified into a dazzling field of light; showering gold, as it seemed, downward upon the landscape. Resting upon the edges and undersides of the leaves, it transformed them as by magic.

Even when those brilliant flecks of light had found their way into the room, which they illumined to its remotest corners, Sebastian was still pursued by that vague sense of uneasiness, impossible to explain. He softly opened the door of his room and passed into the hall. The corridor, spacious as it was, was close after the night, since neither air nor light penetrated there. The door of his father's room was ajar. All was still therein, and Sebastian feared to disturb the sleeper. Weighing upon him more than ever, and now with a chill of clearly defined terror, was that impalpable something. He pushed the door ever so slightly open, with a movement that could not by any possibility be disturbing, and glanced toward the bed. There was nothing, at first sight, to cause uneasiness,—nothing tangible or immediately visible. Nevertheless, the young man rushed forward, no longer with the fear of wakening the sleeper, but with a sudden, overpowering dread that he could never, by any process whatsoever, be awakened any more. He flew to the window and threw out the blinds, that the light might fall full upon the

face of the figure in the bed. Its repose was absolute, fixed, unchangeable,—the repose that comes but once to the children of men. Sebastian approached, with a feeling of terror that caused him to shake as with an ague, and drew aside the clothes. Despite an intense physical repulsion, he touched the stiffening body and laid a hand upon the heart.

By a purely mechanical movement he hurried to the telephone in the adjoining study, and, seizing the receiver of the instrument that had been last raised to the ear of the dead, he called up the nearest church, with an emergency call for a priest. That was the sure instinct of faith, overtopping every other consideration. This done, with a surprising calmness he asked for his brother Louis' number; and had no difficulty in getting the doctor, who had just come in from a wearisome case.

“Bring another doctor with you; and for God's sake come as quickly as you can! I fear it is the end,” was the message to which Louis made instant preparations to respond.

The priest, however, was the first to reach the house. He was admitted by the trembling and awe-stricken servant whom Sebastian had roused, and to whom he had given a few brief instructions. Passing up the heavily carpeted stairs with a haste that took no note of the luxurious surroundings, the minister of God approached the bed, and, bending, examined the motionless figure. Then he took from the

bag he carried a purple stole, and stood there, a wonderfully solemn and impressive figure in his almost boyish youthfulness.

"I am going to give him conditional absolution," he said, with a pitying glance at Sebastian, who with strained eagerness watched his movements; "and also Extreme Unction."

"Do you think, then, there is life?" The words were almost inarticulate.

The priest paused for an instant before replying simply:

"I am going to give him the benefit of the doubt."

Standing erect, he raised his hand. So slender and youthful it was, and yet Sebastian's inmost soul was filled with the realization that all the might of the universe was not equal to the power that radiated thence,—that centuries-old power, divinest gift to sinful man.

Through and through the silence of the room, the low-spoken words of the priest thrilled and vibrated: "*Ego te absolvo*,—I absolve thee in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost." After which the priest wasted not an instant; while Sebastian, taking up a prayer-book belonging to his mother which lay near, answered those sublimely beautiful prayers which attend the closing scene of the mortal drama.

The Sacrament administered, the young curate knelt down and recited, in a voice that faltered from his sense of the tragedy that had just

been enacted in that richly appointed bedroom, the *De Profundis*. Once more the words seemed to resound through the still air, and go forth from that open window into the vastness of the city, now waking into life. They seemed to mock the luxury of the apartment; while each syllable fell like lead upon Sebastian's heart, burning and searing it; showing that no hope remained, and making him realize the gulf over which had passed the lately living garrulous father.

At the last verse of the Psalm, Louis rushed into the room, crying:

"What is it, Sebastian? What—"

He stopped on seeing that the two were on their knees, and that one of them was a priest. He heard the concluding words of the prayer, and an ashy paleness overspread his face. Composing his manner, however, to something of professional calm, he approached the bed, and, drawing over a chair, sat down beside the patient, who had passed beyond his skill. He raised his head after a moment; while the priest withdrew a little, and the brothers faced each other.

"He has been dead some time," said Louis, in a low tone.

"That is what I feared," observed the priest. "May the Lord have mercy on his soul!"

At those words horror of another sort seized upon the soul of Sebastian, tingling through

all his veins and benumbing his senses. For suddenly he realized the immensity, the infinitude of all that had been neglected in the rush of affairs that had but lately seemed all important. And now these affairs of yesterday were as nothing, and something supremely important had happened to the soul that had escaped into life.

"Oh, poor father," cried Sebastian,—“dear, dear father!” And it seemed as if all the pity and tenderness of his nature were compressed into that exclamation.

Louis, regarding him intently, came forward, took his hand and looked into his face.

“It is a dreadful blow, old fellow!” he said.

“The most dreadful part is that he” (pointing mechanically toward the priest) “was too late.”

Louis bent his head, while Sebastian asked:

“And you are sure that there is no hope of his having been alive when—”

Louis turned away.

“I have asked Doctor Martin to come,” he answered. “He will make another examination. And” (pausing to listen to the opening of the street door below) “here he is now!”

Louis went to meet him in the hall.

“I am sorry, Doctor,” he said, “to have given you the trouble of coming; for the veriest tyro could tell that life has been some time extinct.”

Nevertheless there was a flicker of hope in

Sebastian's heart as the great physician made a far more careful and exhaustive examination than Louis had done.

"I am forced to agree with you, Doctor," he replied, addressing the second son; "though the appearances of death are sometimes very deceptive."

As they descended the stairs together, Sebastian said to Louis:

"Perhaps Doctor Martin will be the better for some refreshment. Will you see to that, Louis?"

The same invitation was extended to the priest; but he declined, remarking that he had yet to say Mass. Sebastian pressed into his hand a sum of money for Masses. "Have them said as soon as possible," he begged; and the priest, after a few words of sympathy, and promising to return again, took his leave.

Going to the phone, Sebastian then notified his brother Alfred; and, that done, re-entered the silent room, and, throwing himself down, prayed as he had not prayed at least since his college days; striving to calm, if he might, the aching at his heart. He remained there undisturbed—for Louis was still detained with his fellow-physician below—until the arrival of Alfred and his wife.

The former was a pale man, with hair that scarcely differed from the yellow tint of his puffy cheeks, and a manner dull and pompous. He was naturally as much disturbed by the

tragic happening of the night as it was possible for such a nature as his to be. The wife, lithe and agile, and with a surplus of energy in her attenuated person, began at once to interest herself in the affairs.

"It is all so very dreadful, Sebastian!" she cried. "You must tell us everything when you feel able."

Her tone, somehow, implied that there was a great deal which Alfred and she should have heard earlier; and Sebastian said gravely:

"There is very little to tell. The doctor believes—it was very sudden."

"You poor, poor boy!" said the lady. "You shall not tell us anything more. But have *they* been notified?"

"They? My God, no!" replied Sebastian, with a groan. For so long it had been his custom to spare them everything unpleasant that, in his present dazed condition, he forgot the very essential duty of letting his mother and sister know. He recoiled from the task with an indescribable dread.

"I will send a telegram at once!" he said.

"No: Alfred will do it," his sister-in-law answered. "You really must not attempt to do any more."

"I will do that," he said resolutely; and, going into his father's study, he wrote out the dispatch.

Louis, coming in and leaning over his shoulder, made the suggestion that he should send a first

one, saying, simply: "Come at once. Father ill."

This being done, Sebastian wandered restlessly about without any definite idea in his mind save that of wonder as to how his mother and Margie would receive the shocking news. His mind dwelt longest, perhaps, upon the latter. With a passionate gush of tenderness, he remembered her as a little, fair-haired child running to the door to meet her father.

In the fever of restlessness that was upon him, he again entered the study where his father had been busy during the last hours of his earthly existence. He saw the table was strewn with papers upon which his father had been working; and, by an indefinable impulse, he swept them all into the drawer and possessed himself of the key. Remembering the hint which his father had thrown out in their last conversation, concerning certain difficulties with which Sebastian, in case of an emergency, would have to deal, it seemed essential that he should have the clue to their nature, if such clue were to be found amongst those papers.

The day that followed seemed interminable to Sebastian. Mrs. Alfred glided about from one room to another, and, with the assistance of one of her servants whom she had brought thither, put the house in order for the coming of its mistress; while the Sisters of Charity prayed in the room with the dead. Toward

evening Sebastian sat with his two brothers in the aimless fashion that belongs to such occasions, vaguely noting that Alfred was scarcely less dull and flaccid than usual, and Louis restless and uneasy. It was the former who inquired, fixing his eyes upon his younger brother:

“Didn’t you notice any symptoms in poor father that could have prepared you for the sad ending?”

“What’s the use of interjecting adjectives, Alfred?” put in Louis, irritably; but Sebastian responded to the inquiry after an instant of hesitation:

“I can’t say that I noticed anything very marked, except that he complained of finding the weather oppressive, and took my arm in going up the steps. Then there was, perhaps, a rather unusual way of talking.”

“Way of talking?” echoed Alfred, taking out a cigar, which he began to light with an exasperating deliberation. The proceeding jarred upon Sebastian. To him it seemed incongruous, under the circumstances; but he shook off the feeling, and condescended to give the information asked for.

“Father talked a good deal,” he said, “about the business and its responsibilities, which he considered were too much for one person. He seemed to regret that you two were not members of the firm.”

Alfred puffed meditatively at his cigar and nodded, as he observed:

"Just what my wife was telling me."

Louis said nothing, but, folding one nervous hand over the other, looked at them as though he were engaged in considering their anatomical structure.

"I suggested," continued Sebastian, "that he should have gone to Newport with the others, as I had frequently urged him to do. But he declared that such procedure would have been impossible, since it left me alone."

Alfred looked uneasy. He took the cigar from his mouth.

"If such is the case," he said, "and no one was better qualified to judge than our lament—" (he glanced at Louis and suppressed the adjective) "than father, it is a bad business. What will you do now? What will any of us do? For should the business go to the wall, our professional incomes—I speak for Louis and myself—will be insufficient for everyday demands."

"What will you do? Why, whatever you think best, of course," observed Sebastian.

But here Louis put aside both speakers definitely.

"You, Sebastian," he said, "have been for some time past—and you know it—the real head of the business; in fact, the only one that counted."

A flame shot forth from the eyes of Sebas-

tian for an instant. Who does not like to find his capacity recognized at its full value! But it died in an instant, in a wave of half-remorseful pity for the dead man who had done his best and yet of whom this could be said. Sebastian felt resentful against Louis for having put it into words, though he had a different sort of resentment against Alfred, who had denied his competency. The last-named shook his head portentously.

"I hope you are right, Louis," he said. "But my wife is quite of my opinion: that it is too great responsibility to be thrown upon a young man like Sebastian."

"A man does not feel so very young at twenty-eight," murmured Sebastian, thinking how much older he felt than one at least of the two men before him, and what a burden of difficult decisions and weighty affairs he had borne upon his shoulders. Indeed, the chief misgiving that he now felt was the difficulty of coping with just such an attitude of mind on the part of some, both within and without, of the family. Men who had been dealing with him for months past, under the shadow of his father's age and experience, might now distrust him. As he sat back in his chair and surveyed his brothers, he had a feeling that he might discover in Alfred—or, more properly, speaking in his wife—an officious and perhaps actively interfering critic. It was a relief to find, even though it was a shock to

hear it baldly stated, that Louis understood the situation.

The latter, in answer to what Alfred had observed last, exclaimed:

"Those things have nothing at all to do with a man's age, unless in the sense that a preference should generally be accorded to youth!"

While Alfred gasped at this revolutionary statement, Louis went on to explain:

"I am not undervaluing anything that age can give us. But it seems to me that in our complex modern system, especially where commercial matters are concerned, only a young man can cope with the difficulties."

Alfred smiled incredulously.

"Was it age or was it youth that placed Wilmot & Co. where it is?" he inquired, sententiously.

"I presume that father was a young man when he laid its foundations and did the strenuous work," Louis replied. And, with the first touch of feeling that he had shown during the interview, he added: "No one could be farther than I from undervaluing what he has done for us all, and what we have lost in him. I can't think calmly of it yet. But, nevertheless, as I understand the situation, Sebastian holds it in the hollow of his hand."

There was a perceptible pause of some moments, during which Alfred smoked in a plainly dissenting silence, which he was the first to break.

"To go back to where we started," he said: "so you did not notice any alarming symptoms in the deceased?"

"No," answered Sebastian. "I sat with him during the evening, and he seemed much as usual. Later, unable to sleep myself, and feeling somehow uneasy, I went to his door, and found that he had not gone to bed, but was in his study. I asked him if he felt ill. He replied in the negative, seeming annoyed at my presence, which had disturbed him in some work he was doing."

It was now Louis' turn to ask:

"You don't happen to know the nature of that work?"

"I do not," Sebastian answered.

"I am asking from a professional point of view, of course," said the Doctor. "For I suspect that it was some perturbation of mind, probably over a difficult point of business, that, together with the heat and over-fatigue, caused dissolution."

"Regrets are useless," said Sebastian; "but I wish we had all persuaded him to go away, even at the risk of my wrecking the business in the meantime."

The sarcasm was intended for those (including nearly all the members of the family) who had agreed that it would be impossible for David Wilmot to go to the sea, or to leave town at all, in that unusually busy time.

"I advised him to that effect some months

ago," said Louis; "but, as you say, regrets are useless now."

The conversation was interrupted by the appearance of Mrs. Alfred.

"A telegram has just come for you, Sebastian."

He took it, and read aloud:

"We can not reach the city until seven in the morning. A slight accident to train has caused delay. MARGIE."

Sebastian turned to the window, away from the prying eyes that were reading the signs of suffering on his face. For the thought of that home-coming was as acid on a raw wound.

"God help them!" he murmured; while Mrs. Alfred, following him over to the window and laying a hand on his arm, said:

"You mustn't feel a bit anxious. Alfred and I will see to everything. And we'll meet the dear ones at the train."

"I thought," said Sebastian, "of going there myself."

"No, no!" she rejoined. "I can see that you are quite unnerved by this awful shock. It is better that, in so public a place as the station, they should be met by Alfred, who is always calm and composed. You see, we want to spare you everything we can."

"Arrange it as you like," said Sebastian, wearily. For he did not feel equal to a contest; and, after all, it could not matter very much.

He left the room and went upstairs again, where he joined the Sisters in the recitation

of the Rosary,—with the wish, overmastering everything else, that he, that they all, had given more attention to these matters, and had been less exclusively occupied with the fleeting affairs of time.

It was, therefore, at the door only that Sebastian received the two travel-worn and grief-stricken women. He took his mother into his arms, looking down at her from his height with love and tenderness, but saying little,—as indeed there was little to be said. Although Mrs. Wilmot comported herself more calmly than might have been expected, she waved aside the suggestion, made by Louis, that she should take at least a cup of coffee before visiting the chamber of death.

She began to ascend the stairs alone, and with something of her wonted impetuosity. Sebastian followed, putting his arm about Margie, who was shivering, and drew her close to his side, as if striving to give her warmth and comfort. When they had reached the top of the stairs, the girl laid her head against her brother and sobbed convulsively. It was but for a moment. Mastering herself by a brave effort, she went after her mother into the silent room, where the Sisters rose to greet them. Mrs. Wilmot advanced straight to the bier, and, after a long gaze into the familiar features, with their new repose and dignity, sank upon her knees, where she was joined by the weeping Margie. Sebastian stole softly away from the

door and down to where Louis was pacing the hall. He looked around for Alfred; but the latter had fled from the too painful scene, and Sebastian heard his voice in conference with his wife in the living room.

IV.

It was late at night. Mrs. Wilmot and Margie had been induced to take some rest. Louis had gone to attend one or two urgent cases amongst his patients, where a substitute would not be accepted. Mrs. Alfred had returned home for the night, and Alfred was drearily dozing in the living room. Sebastian had remained alone, watching with the two Sisters of Charity, silent and prayerful figures. It occurred to him that there was a good opportunity to examine his father's papers before the lawyers and others arrived for the reading of the will, or whatsoever formalities might be necessitated by the great change.

It seemed somehow like a desecration, and he felt he had no right to enter that room, which had been the special sanctum of the deceased. His father had retired there when he had anything important to decide, or, as Sebastian suspected, when he was over-weary and disposed for solitude. The young man could understand now as, declining to occupy the vacant chair, he had seated himself confronting it, how the ponderous and heavy man, when the talk below was all light and frivolous,

and when, perhaps, he had felt his own presence a restraint, had come up thither, his departure being hailed with unconscious relief. Sitting there alone, with some twinges of self-remorse, the young man strove to realize what might have been his father's feelings under such circumstances: whether he had been depressed by the isolation in which he often found himself, or if his slow intuitions had taken but little note thereof. It almost seemed at last, to the watcher, as if the chair opposite were occupied by that portly and important figure lying now so still and so awful in its shroud.

Sebastian began to feel that he could stand it no longer, but must get through the business that had brought him thither—the examination of those papers upon which his father had last been engaged, and which he instinctively felt were not for every eye. He realized, too, at that moment that, though there had never been a very strong bond of sympathy between them, they had been, in fact, most intimately united. For, apart from the hints which his father had given him in that memorable conversation, he was quite convinced that he alone—he in preference to all others—should look upon those papers and whatever self-revelation they might contain. He shrank more sensitively than any of the others would have done, with the exception perhaps of Margie, from the idea that something might be discovered,—something for which his father's

broken words in the carriage had in a measure prepared him.

With a nervous hand he unlocked the drawer and took thence all the papers which he had swept into its depths upon the night of the death. Most of them were of little importance,—bills which had been paid, notes upon various business transactions, which, to the acute mind of the observer, possibly betrayed the paucity even in that direction of his father's resources. It must have been nearing midnight when suddenly Sebastian was confronted with something that appalled him, that took all the courage from his trembling frame. The room was dimly lighted by a single electric bulb; though at his elbow stood a half-burned taper which his father had been using to seal letters, but which Sebastian with a shudder refrained from relighting.

This was no hideous spectre of the night, however; no shape that had taken on the semblance of the deceased; nothing palpable nor tangible. Still it took the living son by the throat and gripped him, changing his whole outlook upon life. His imagination leaped forth as a flame, and hurried him backward into the dark recesses of the past and forward into a future thus transformed and transmogrified. It showed him in a swift flash the effect which this terrific thing, that had stared at him from those closely-written pages, would have upon the life and character, did it ever

pass his lips, of those who now more than ever were in his hands, to do with them as he chose. Each of these persons was now invested with a new importance. He passed each one of them before his mental vision—his mother, Margie, Louis, Alfred, and Mrs. Alfred—as though he were testing their several dispositions and capabilities.

The stillness in the room appeared to him terrifying; and opposite to him—living, palpable, clothed once more in the familiar lineaments of life—he seemed to see his father. There were the heavy eyes—how full of pleading!—and the mouth opening as if it would speak, in remorse, in self-accusation; in a desire to explain, to right a wrong, to undo what had been done; to make straight, if such were possible, the rugged path. Sebastian, for some silent, intense moments, stared at the vision which his excited fancy had conjured up; while upon his own young life fell a silence, sombre, melancholy, containing all the elements of a tragedy. For to such silence Sebastian bound himself in that interview with the dead, during which he had entered into and seemed to understand, as he never could have done in life, the mind of the departed. He pledged himself not only to be silent, but to sympathize, even to pardon.

He rose abruptly, and, as if to ratify that contract, went into the chamber of death. The lights were burning, symbol of the soul immortal,

of that survival of the earthly frame's decay; the smell of the flowers, on the other hand, seeming to emphasize the idea of mortality, since they appeared to say, "Perishable, even as are we, the life of man vanishes in a day." The Sisters, still keeping their watch, were as the symbol of a peace deeper than that of the dead, and of a hope that pierced the darkness into which, under these accumulated trials, the mind of Sebastian had fallen. He knelt down, and solemnly there, beside his father's lifeless form, he renewed that promise which he had already taken of deep and absolute silence, and also of ordering everything, in so far as circumstances would permit, according to that father's wishes. Looking into the face of his late parent, the young man experienced no feelings of anger for the burden that had been laid upon him; his heart knew only pity deep and profound.

He shut himself once more into the study, and, with a new courage and resolution, began to reflect upon that matter which had been burned in upon him, but which, as if by the purification of fire, had left him stronger and more invigorated, saying by his whole attitude: "This also has to be met, as you have met so many things in the years that have separated you from boyhood." That paper upon which his father had been busy when he had disturbed him on that fatal night was no doubt the proximate cause of his death, in the heart-rending self-revelation which it had

involved, and in the bitter memories and the long train of anxieties and apprehensions which it must have evoked. Sebastian understood many things as he perused for the second time those pages.

This was the substance of the narrative which Sebastian read in the darkness of that midnight, and from which he drew his own conclusions. It began at the very beginning, so to say, of his father's life.

A young lad thrown upon his own resources, and before he had begun to lay the foundation of his future fortunes, he had met and fallen in love with a young girl who had been one of his fellow-workers in the mill wherein he was employed. She had a pretty face and an easy, jocular manner that had captivated young Wilmot. As she was a Methodist and absolutely refused to be married by a priest, the infatuated suitor made his first false step in consenting to be married by a minister. The marriage, however, was sufficiently happy for some time following the birth of a daughter. But the girl soon proved to be silly and vacuous, vain, irritable, and exacting; and the same want of stability and of principle that had permitted David Wilmot to be false to his religious convictions made it little likely that he would bear with her defects. Quarrels became frequent, until at last one dark night the young woman disappeared, taking the child with her.

The husband then, and for months afterward, made such inquiries as he could; but at that time he had neither fortune nor influence at his command, and his efforts were unsuccessful. He drifted away from the place, which had become hateful to him, leaving the generally accepted notion abroad that his wife was dead. He went to New York, where he entered as a clerk in a business house, of which he subsequently became the proprietor. The loss of his young wife affected David but little. He had long recovered from his temporary infatuation; and as he began to mount the commercial and social ladder his relief became more marked. He realized to the full what a handicap she would have been to his vaulting ambition.

At length he began to persuade himself that she was dead and that possibly their marriage was invalid; and these considerations grew and strengthened with the years, especially when the temptation offered to marry another woman. Miss Morris was handsome, attractive, clever; and, being the daughter of a wealthy manufacturer, was a prize worth the winning. Since David had given up the practice of his religion—which, indeed, had never had much hold on him, having been left an orphan in childhood,—he presently allowed himself to be convinced that it was perfectly proper for him to marry. He made a few more cautious inquiries, and discovered that the minister before whom

his first marriage had been contracted was dead. That was another link broken with that past which he so ardently wished to forget, and there was absolutely no trace to be found of mother or child. It seemed to him probable that either his former wife had died or had married another man, and would have no desire to revive unpleasant memories.

He hesitated no longer, but was married to Miss Morris in St. ——'s Catholic church. It must be owned that he trembled up to the last moment; for it seemed to him that some portentous figure must arise to forbid the banns. But not the slightest incident occurred to mar the tranquillity of the day. The ceremony passed off happily; though, his dead faith awaking, David Wilmot shook as with an ague at the aspect of the priest in habiliments that had once been familiar; and some realization of the crime he was committing dawned upon his mind at the questions and the solemn exhortations of the minister of religion. These feelings, however, gradually wore away; and, though now of comparatively mature age, he felt an exultant happiness in the prize he had secured.

He passed from one degree of prosperity to another. Fortune seemed to smile upon him in every way. But over it all was the dark cloud of constraint, of fear, sometimes of actual terror. The Nemesis threatened at every moment to appear, shattering the fabric that

had been so laboriously constructed. As he grew older, this condition of alarm, of vague dread, and the whisperings of conscience became more insistent. They seemed to paralyze all his actions; they embittered his relations with his wife, between whom and himself there had arisen a slight but tangible barrier of estrangement. He feared his wife no less than his children. The keen eyes of Sebastian, the even more penetrating and less gentle ones of Louis, were a menace. The dulness of Alfred was a relief. And so the years had gone on.

The account was businesslike, terse, and set down in but few words, and without any attempt at expressing (which, indeed, would have been impossible to the writer)—the long, silent agony of remorse, of shame, the dread of possible detection. Surely, the young man thought, the dead had been punished for his sin; and the mercy of God might have accepted the expiation, if only the priest had been in time, and the dying sinner had had some moments of full consciousness. Sebastian remembered with relief—for the survivors in such cases are apt to grasp at straws—how feelingly his poor father had spoken on the subject of religion that last afternoon of his life. His thoughts, at least, had turned in that direction.

Sebastian, cheered by the vague comfort, took the final sheet of that strange narrative,

which remained unfinished, the hand-writing blurred and indistinct toward the close. The youngest son was requested by his father to take into his hands the whole management of that delicate affair. He did not enjoin secrecy: he left that, with a pathetic shamefacedness, to his son's own sense of what was right and fitting. He begged him, if possible, to discover whether or no the wife so long abandoned was still living; and if she were not, to try to find the child, who had been called, from the pages no doubt of some novel, Elmira. He further decreed that, until those persons were found and such provision made for them as might seem fitting, or until the fact of their death had been put beyond question, the present house in Gramercy Park, should remain in possession of the estate, and on no account whatever be sold. The last paragraph that had been written began:

“And now I have to tell you what may afford you—”

But there the pen had dropped from the hand which, perchance, had left sufficient of the weakness of approaching death to cause the writer to seek repose, with the hope of finishing the page in the morning.

“Oh, if he had only called me! If I had only known, I might have done something even then!”

Alas! Such reflections were now futile; and the young man pictured the scene to himself:

the poor, blundering father, weighted with the burden of that early wrongdoing, the chief organ of life, like some delicate machine, put out of gear by the strain that had been brought to bear upon it, stumbled to his bed and lay down, believing that the rest would restore him. As his son thought pityingly, he had never been in the habit of complaining, and so without complaining he had died.

It was grey dawn when Sebastian, hearing the murmur of voices, opened the door slightly and looked into the adjoining apartment. It was, as he had thought, his mother and Margie who had come down and were praying there; and, in his excited state, it seemed to him that he was regarding them from another world into which he had suddenly been thrust. He could not see his mother's face, since her back was to him, and her head was bowed as in fervent prayer or weeping. But he saw Margie very plainly,—poor little Margie, with the small, sensitive face, very white and pitifully stained. A passionate wish surged up in his heart that his father could be alive once more, and that everything could go on in the old commonplace and sometimes monotonous way. That familiar monotony of everyday life, when it is unbroken by any trouble, is one of the things for which few people are sufficiently grateful.

“Eternal rest,—eternal rest!”—that was what they were wishing to the deceased, who so

long had borne a burden that must at times have been well-nigh unendurable.

"Oh," Sebastian thought, "if only the priest had arrived in time, that there might be some certainty of proximate rest!"

He closed the door softly. He did not want Margie or his mother to see him. He desired to keep away from them as long as possible, till this strange new thing should have become, in its turn, commonplace. He thought he would go downstairs and test his composure, his power of appearing undisturbed, by confronting Alfred, the least formidable, where perception was concerned, of all the family. He felt glad just then to reflect that Alfred was dull, and had never discovered anything in his life by his own initiative. He had a curious feeling that, after he had once spoken to some human being, he would never be so much afraid of meeting people's glances and answering their inquiry.

He knew that it was light. "The night breaketh and the morning cometh," he repeated over mechanically to himself, but he did not approach the window. Seeing that all was in order, and pondering over in his mind what it was that his father had left unfinished in that document, and how he would have finished it if he had had time, he opened the door into the hall, and, in the dim light that penetrated there, came face to face with Mrs. Alfred. She was the last person on earth he

would have desired to see just then. He had not thought of her,—hoping, in fact, that she was safe at home. But he set his mouth grimly. Since she was there, she had to be faced and to be defied. Those light, smiling eyes of hers, which at that moment he detested, should never, he told himself, pierce the grey veil of silence in which he had wrapped himself. He stood still, involuntarily putting his back to the door, though everything within the room was under lock and key,—yes, locked up in that safe, of which he alone now had the secret.

“Why, you poor boy!” Mrs. Alfred said, coming very close and putting her slim hand on his arm, so that he felt as if she could almost feel the tense effort he was making to appear natural. “I hurried back here as soon as it was light. I have sent Alfred off to bed.”

Sebastian had a curious inclination to laugh out loud. Alfred, whom he had been most desirous of seeing, had been sent off to bed, and here was this lynx-eyed woman prepared to keep watch and ward over him and his movements!

“I was looking for you everywhere,” she went on. “James, your man, wants instructions about something of which I know nothing.”

“Oh, is there anything of which you know nothing?” said Sebastian, with a touch of hilarity, that Mrs. Alfred, in her own mind, promptly condemned as heartless, but which was merely ghastly. Her impulse was to turn

away. Also she had a dark suspicion that Sebastian, who was never known to touch alcohol of any kind, had been drinking. His manner, she thought, was so peculiar, his eyes so unnatural, and his misplaced laughter so forced.

"My dear Sebastian," she cried, "what is the matter? What can you possibly have been doing."

"I have been doing nothing," he said, in quick self-defence,—“absolutely nothing: sitting still, and—”

"It would have been much wiser to go to bed," the woman said, returning to her soft, caressing manner, as she saw that her first suspicion was unfounded. "You are wearing yourself out, and you look as if you had seen a ghost."

"I never did!" cried Sebastian, in the same hasty self-defence which appeared in him so unnatural, but which, in his abnormal state of mind, seemed the only thing to do. And, leaving her abruptly, he fled to his own room.

V.

SEBASTIAN ever afterward remembered the first confidential meeting with his mother under these new conditions, with this new knowledge that had risen up as a barrier between him and her. She was sitting in the living room, in her deep mourning garb, with her brilliant coloring subdued, her manner still and solemn, and utterly unlike her ordinary mien of buoyant cheerfulness and contentment with life. Beside her sat Mrs. Alfred, stroking her hand. Margie and the two brothers were also in the room. Sebastian, somehow, now saw them as the children with whom he had played long ago, and to whom their father, always with his nervous, constrained efforts at kindness, had given silver coins or toys or confectionery.

"Sebastian," said his mother, and her voice was low and unusual in its sound, "Caroline has just been saying that you are quite a stranger to us these last days."

"Yes," replied Sebastian, "I have felt that myself. There were so many things to do."

He looked, with a curious impulse of defiance, at his brother's wife rather than at his mother, as if challenging her to prove that

there had been anything unwarranted by circumstances in his action.

"It has been very dreadful for us all," said the mother; "but of course upon me the blow fell hardest. After so many years of companionship—"

She stopped, turning her face away to the window; while Margie, who herself was making a brave effort to control her tears, drew near and stole her arm around her mother's neck. Mrs. Alfred, more assiduously than ever, stroked her hand and murmured unintelligible ejaculations.

"Now, this will never do," said Louis, speaking from a corner of the room where he had been studying the daily paper. "The sooner the house gets back to its usual order, and every one of us to his and her usual pursuits, the better. Were father here, he would be the first to advocate that course of action."

He glanced at Sebastian; but, as the latter did not speak, his tone became more authoritative.

"Mother, I for one—from a medical point of view, if from no other,—am not going to allow you to sit moping in a darkened room as you have been doing. You are injuring your health for no reason whatsoever."

"Well, what do you want me to do?" the mother said helplessly, and she looked from one to the other of her sons,—Louis imposing by his firm and solid build, Alfred stout and

flabby. Her eyes wandered from them to the slim, boyish figure and the face, now grave and impassive, of her youngest son. Her gaze resting longest upon him, it seemed as if to him the question was addressed. Sebastian made haste to answer:

"To do as Louis suggests."

"But he has suggested nothing," the mother said, half irritably.

"To be specific, then," continued Louis, "I think you should go for a drive this very afternoon."

"Go for a drive," she said, with something of horror in her tone, "scarcely two weeks after—"

"What does the number of days matter?" cried Louis. "Now, mother, do be sensible! Sebastian will order the carriage for four o'clock."

"Have it your own way," answered the widow. "I suppose those things matter very little."

"Margie will go with you," said Louis, wondering what had come to Sebastian that he stood there so apathetically, leaning against the mantelpiece and regarding his mother.

"No," replied Mrs. Wilmot, "Margie can not go. Her dressmaker is coming this afternoon. Caroline must come with me."

"Yes, certainly Mrs. Alfred will go," said Louis. It was a trifling but noteworthy fact in the family that the young men never called

their brother's wife by her Christian name, though of course their mother did so.

"I shall be so glad to go with you, dear!" said Mrs. Alfred.

"Thanks, Caroline!" responded the widow. "You are always ready when you are wanted."

"And sometimes when she is *not*," muttered Louis under his breath, so low that only Sebastian heard him.

It was, therefore, arranged that Mrs. Wilmot should drive. Mrs. Alfred presently went upstairs to put on her things, offering to bring down the widow's bonnet and wrap, that she might not have to mount the stairs; and both Louis and Alfred took their leave, walking down the street together in a silence rarely broken. Margie went away, by her mother's direction, to answer some of the letters of condolence; and Sebastian and his mother were left alone.

"So, my dear boy," said the mother, looking up at him half fondly, half resentfully, "everything has been left in your hands."

"O mother," exclaimed Sebastian, with a sudden, involuntary cry of anguish, "I wish to God it were not so!"

His mother looked surprised.

"But," she said, "I thought—at least Caroline was lately remarking—and, by the way, what a bright, intelligent, sympathetic creature she is—invaluable at a time like this!"

"What was she remarking?" Sebastian asked,

in a voice that sounded once more cold and lifeless.

"Why, that she thought it pleased you best to have the chief management of the concern in your hands."

"To speak frankly, mother," said Sebastian, "in that respect Mrs. Alfred is quite right. The business in its essential features can best be managed by me."

The mother's eyes flashed. They were dark eyes and like his own. A curious antagonism toward her youngest son for the first time appeared in their depths,—a feeling which then, and afterward, was carefully fostered by Mrs. Alfred.

"Like many young men," she remarked quietly, "you have a good opinion of your own powers."

"As regards my business capacities, yes."

"Your father appears to have agreed with you," said the mother, again with slight bitterness; "but at least I am glad to see that he has placed Alfred, and if necessary Louis, in the position of advisers. In my humble estimation, no one could be better in such a capacity than Alfred, with his solid, deliberate judgment and legal abilities."

Sebastian did not argue the point; and the mother, raising her head, which, by a movement of dejection, she had let fall upon her hand, asked:

"What did you mean by saying a moment

ago that you wished to God some other arrangement had been made?"

Sebastian's face was partly turned away as he answered:

"I was not thinking of the business. I had other things in mind."

"What other things?" demanded the mother.

Sebastian bit his lip. He had been indiscreet.

"Why, the general management of the estate," he said with some embarrassment, "in which may arise, from time to time, occasions when my opinion must run counter to that of others, perhaps even to yours."

"I hope not," rejoined the mother, with emphasis,—*"I sincerely hope not."*

"Not half so sincerely as I do," said Sebastian; for he already had in view contingencies that might arise.

"I trust you perfectly understand," the mother said haughtily, "that my husband—*my husband*, you understand—"

Sebastian felt a tremor go through him. Why did she insist upon that point? Then he saw that it was only by way of emphasizing her rights, which some latent irritation in her own mind, or some suggestion of Mrs. Alfred, had caused her to fancy were being threatened. Never before had the young man heard such a tone from his mother, who had always been kindly, genial and sympathetic. It impressed him painfully.

"My dearest mother," he said, "one thing

you must know is certain: your wishes shall always be my wishes, where that is possible."

Mrs. Wilmot relented, without noticing the qualifying clause.

"You must forgive me, Sebastian," she rejoined, "if I have said anything disagreeable. But I am all upset. The shock was too much for me, especially" (she lowered her voice and shuddered) "as your poor father was taken away so suddenly, without having had the priest."

Sebastian had not been sure until that moment that she had taken to heart that particular phase of the late bereavement; for he could never remember her as a religious woman, or one who had taken the affairs of the spirit very seriously. The admission had been forced from him often, though most reluctantly, and only in the depths of his own mind. Margie alone, of all that household, had been devout,—had carried about with her an unobtrusive but unmistakable leaven of genuine piety.

"And, Sebastian," the mother said, rising from her chair and going over close to her son, "it frets me to think how irreligious the poor dear man was, just from the stress of business, and how little I ever did to make him less indifferent."

"Oh, you mustn't say that, mother!" cried Sebastian. "Try not to think of these things."

"But you know it is true, and I can't help

thinking about it; and I am afraid I shall always go on thinking about it. For if your father died unprepared, it was partly my fault."

The anguish which she put into that tragic whisper pierced Sebastian's heart.

"You are morbid, mother," he replied. "You know very well that you always went to church and to confession, and—"

"If I had been like Margie," the mother cried, "he and all of you would have been different!"

It was a statement hard to controvert; though Sebastian, with his additional knowledge, was quite aware that it was only half a truth. It would have been very difficult, indeed, for David Wilmot to practise his religion without a radical readjustment of his affairs. The young man, however, made one more gallant effort.

"You mustn't exaggerate, mother," he said. "It was simply that my poor father, like so many other business men, had grown careless. But I know you will be glad to hear that on the very last afternoon of his life, as we drove up town together, he spoke to me very strongly of the necessity of having practical religion and keeping one's conscience in order."

The mother looked at him sharply.

"I am surprised that you never told me that before," she said. "This habit of con-

cealment will grow upon you till dear knows where it will end."

"You forget," observed Sebastian, very gently, "that, as you remarked a few moments ago, I have scarcely seen you, at least in such a way as to give me an opportunity of telling you."

"Well," the mother said, "I am glad to hear it now. It gives me a little hope."

She buried her face in her handkerchief as she spoke, and sobbed aloud—at which juncture Mrs. Alfred glided into the room, carrying the widow's bonnet and veil, together with a heavy wrap. She laid these down upon a chair, and, approaching Mrs. Wilmot with an air of great concern, said aside to Sebastian:

"Now, you imprudent boy, you have been agitating her in some way!"

Sebastian looked at her in grim silence, while Mrs. Wilmot faintly murmured:

"No, he is not to blame. He has done the best he could, and has given me some real comfort."

"Well, well, dear, we shall go for a drive now!" said Mrs. Alfred, adjusting the widow's bonnet, and carefully buttoning the wrap about her.

Sebastian, offering his arm to his mother, led her down the steps and placed both ladies in the carriage. When he returned to the room, Margie had come in, and brother and sister breathed a sigh of relief. They sat down

for a confidential talk, during which Margie, too, touched upon the subject that had so deeply agitated his mother; only, of course, she contented herself with deploring that the priest had not arrived in time.

"It simply breaks my heart to think of it," Margie said. "Father was so kind and good!"

"And idolized his little Margie," added the tall brother, sadly. He would have diverted her thoughts, if he could, from that one melancholy fact, which he knew would permanently affect this gentle soul, whose strength looked out from her frail body in the most mobile and expressive of faces.

As the two sat together, a visitor was announced,—such a visitor as could with propriety, even with joy, be received into a house of mourning. It was a priest whom they knew, only by reputation, as a holy religious, whose life was chiefly given up to prisoners and the very outcasts of society. When he entered the room, the brother and sister rose. Margie's whole soul was in her eyes as she gazed at that venerable figure; while Sebastian felt that here, in the genuine humility and saintliness that shone forth so radiantly, was a wonderful force that must dominate by its very renunciation.

He sat down near the two young people with a naturalness and simplicity that put them both at their ease, and began at once to talk of their late loss. His talk was wonderful to them

both; for, though they had been educated under Catholic auspices, and Margie had retained the fervor of her First Communion, there had been little opportunity for religious conversation of any kind. The priest transported them over the borderland of a country which seemed familiar and beloved, giving them glimpses of a great mercy and a great hope.

"And now," he said, "I am going to tell you something. I am sorry that your mother is not here. But you will give her the message."

It added to rather than detracted from the unction of his words that he spoke with a slight trace of a foreign accent, which had clung to him through all the years of his ministry in overcrowded New York.

"Now listen to my words," the priest continued, the sweetness of his smile lighting up his aged face like sunlight on some hoary tree. "Just a week before that lamented death, a gentleman called to see me. I had not met him previously, though I very well knew his name, which he mentioned to me; so that you see there can be no mistake. Well, my dear young people, he had come to talk to me of some of his affairs, and to make a general confession. That gentleman was the late David Wilmot."

Margie sprang to her feet, her eyes sparkling, her whole face transformed with a sudden, overwhelming joy; while to Sebastian it seemed as if some one had rolled a great stone from

the door of his heart. It was for them both a moral resurrection.

"That confession," the priest went on, "was made humbly, simply, with great sorrow and great faith. It was such a confession as grace alone could enable a man to make. And on the very morning of his death did you notice any departure from his ordinary habits?"

"Yes," answered Sebastian. "He went out early, and, as my servant informed me, was gone for some time. I remember he reproached me for being late and keeping him waiting that morning; though it was he who was earlier than usual."

"And he did not tell you where he was going?" the priest inquired.

"No, Father," said Sebastian; "and I asked no questions. He was habitually reticent. I presumed that he had gone for a walk, such as he sometimes took before breakfast, and had extended it that morning."

"He came to me," said the priest. "Our college, where I am at present, is not far from here, and I gave him Holy Communion in our chapel. It was beautiful to see with what fervor he received, the tears rolling down his cheeks."

"Oh," cried Margie, "I shall never feel sorry for my dear father any more! You have made me so happy!"

"Yes," said the priest. "That is why I have come here—to make you happy, to

lighten the load of grief. I am sorry I could not have come sooner. I have been absent from the city."

The priest, seeing that Margie was almost restored to gayety and brightness, turned from her to her brother, whose face he examined attentively. Laying a hand upon the young man's shoulder affectionately, as he himself rose to go, he said:

"And you? I understand that upon you has been laid a great burden. Will you not borrow wings from the sky to enable you to bear it upward? Otherwise, there is danger that it may crush you, my poor fellow!"

Sebastian winced at the words, and drew a deep breath as he looked into that smiling, holy countenance, whence the world and all its disturbing influences had long been banished. It had often seemed to him, since that night when he had been confronted with that grim spectre, that the burden was too great for him to bear alone. His heart went out toward this strength and this calmness, this gentleness and sweetness, in which there might well be help. He wondered if the priest knew. In fact, it was almost certain that he did; and the thought forced itself into his mind:

"How wonderful are these priests of ours, who go about with the burden of all the cares and crime and miseries of men, knowing all, revealing nothing! Even from a human point of view, there are no others like them; for some-

times, under the most commonplace appearance, they conceal that wonderful force, that virtue, which goes forth into the universe, and, wherever its influence extends, holds the chaotic elements in order."

Sebastian went to the door with the priest, consumed by a desire to have his help and counsel, but held back by a supreme fear. What if the priest should deem it necessary for him to break that silence which he had vowed, which he must keep if necessary till his death!

At the door, the priest shook him warmly by the hand, looking once more earnestly into his face.

"If you should want me," he said, "I shall always be ready."

"Sometime I may want you," Sebastian replied; and the priest added:

"Pray, my dear boy; and I shall pray, too. Prayer is the all-powerful."

He passed out into the street, humbly and simply. And Sebastian, looking after him, thought:

"Every word is direct and true,—no cant, no ostentation, no desire for anything but to accomplish in the best manner possible the work to which he has been appointed."

VI.

As the months following David Wilmot's untimely death lapsed into years, smoothly indeed ran the wheels of that vast machinery of the business, scarcely impeded for a moment by the clogging that might, under ordinary circumstances, have occurred when the senior partner died. It then became more and more apparent how little the personality of the comparatively slow-witted and heavily-built man had had to do with the prosperity of the concern. He had, it is true, placed it upon a solid basis in the years that were gone, according to such methods as he understood, or as were then in vogue; and, by his steady, plodding work, might have retained it upon that level of respectable mediocrity. But in the greater operations, in the expansion of later years, it was melancholy to see how he had become, to those who understood the situation, merely the shadow of a name. In Sebastian was centred the whole business. Men who, forming their judgments simply upon the basis of age and experience, had hitherto preferred to deal with the father, now found how much more simple, direct, and efficacious it was to come

directly to that slim and dark-complexioned young man, who, but for the gravity of his look, might have been a good five years younger. The custom of Wilmot & Co. showed a constant tendency to increase, and the firm's operations grew and extended.

It was about a year after the father's death that a stringency in the money market, amounting almost to a universal panic, caused one commercial house after another to go down like trees before a storm. It was then that the positive genius of Sebastian shone forth. He remained at the helm sometimes ten hours out of the day, guiding that barque over rocks and shoals and the furious breakers of financial disaster. He looked paler and thinner when it was over,—that was all. He scarcely said a word at home of the peril that had menaced Wilmot & Co., except to explain that his longer hours were necessitated by unusual stress of business. And he was perfectly well aware that, had the firm gone under, it would have been ascribed to his own inefficiency and his obstinacy in striving to keep everything in his own hands.

Margie, of course, was always sympathetic with what concerned her brother; and Louis came down to the office one afternoon on purpose to prescribe a powerful tonic.

"As soon as the stress is over," he further observed, "you had better go away somewhere for a rest."

Sebastian looked at him, and realized that this brother, who had hitherto said nothing, was fully alive to the situation in the commercial world, which he had supposed was disregarded by the family, and which he had purposely kept secret from Alfred for fear of increasing his meddlesome interference. He only said, therefore, assuming that Louis knew.

"Things have been strenuous. But I'll be all right. I don't easily knock under."

"No one easily knocks under," replied Louis, "apart from chronic invalids. But it's a big mistake to put too great a stress upon the machine."

Sebastian had felt very grateful to this brother, who had never asked a question, nor endeavored in any way to interfere with the management of the concern, nor expressed the slightest fear for its safety,—though there might have been times when he was disposed to accept the verdict of the family as expressed by his mother and Mr. and Mrs. Alfred, and to suppose that Louis was absorbed in his own profession and indifferent to all else. But in the course of that short interview his gratitude was increased, and his respect for the other heightened. It was evident that Louis had really kept a vigilant eye upon what was going on, as far as might be done from the outside; and was convinced that the best interests of all concerned lay in non-interference. Sebastian felt moved to make him a confidant.

"The last two months," he said, "have been the stiffest time I ever remember. Money is scarce, credit shaken, and failures occurring every day, especially in our line of business."

Louis nodded.

"You needn't tell me, my dear fellow," he answered. "I have been watching the thing straight along. But I have had no anxiety. You are of the sort that comes out all right. Just enough daring, without being reckless."

"Louis," said Sebastian, "father was quite right in one particular: you would have been of the greatest help here."

"Thanks!" said Louis, with a slight, constrained laugh. "But you know as well as I do that there is not room here for two. You have the machine in your hands. Any other coming in at this late day would only hinder you."

There was a silence.

"As for hindrances," Louis resumed, "you have found enough,—haven't you?"

"Yes," said Sebastian, "I must admit that I have."

"Alfred," went on Louis, "has a sixth sense for muddling everything that he touches. And he has his wife behind him, who is just clever enough to be dangerous. But stand firm; keep your own counsel; and if he goes too far, kick him out—metaphorically, of course. I should certainly do so literally, if he came meddling with my pill boxes and potions."

"There is a difficulty," said Sebastian, leaning back in his chair. "Being the oldest of us, and mentioned in the will as adviser, he wants to justify the title."

"Adviser be hanged!" exclaimed Louis. "And if you don't take care, that's the rock you'll split upon, after having weathered all these gales. So look out for Alfred—I mean his wife! In her smooth, soft way, she is forever plotting. And," he added irritably, "she can't keep still. She reminds me of what some book-man said about St. Vitus being the patron of us Americans."

The young men, by mutual consent, avoided the more delicate topic of the interference of their mother. She was so lovable and so human in her very weaknesses, that her sons were devoted to her; but they did not, in this instance, trust her judgment. Though in some directions she had the same quick intuitions as her youngest son, she failed to realize the limitations of her oldest; neither had she discovered that for some time past Wilmot & Co. had been Sebastian. The curious feature of it was that, while in his lifetime she had never overrated her late husband, she could not rid herself of the feeling, now that he was dead, that everything must go to rack and ruin without him. The very fact, too, that Sebastian was the youngest of her sons seemed to give her a distrust of his capacity. As if primogeniture must bring wisdom and capacity

for affairs! Perhaps it is hard for a mother to comprehend that the son who was so lately a baby helpless in her arms can be a great mercantile or professional force. In any case, she was persistently haunted by the idea, in which she was supported by Mrs. Alfred, that Alfred should give up the law and go into commerce, and that meantime Sebastian was in need of his advice.

Ever since the opening and reading of the will this had been the struggle. Sebastian had, indeed, been named sole executor, with his brothers, and especially Alfred (because of his legal character), as advisers. Therein, so far as Alfred was concerned, lay all the difficulty. The will was excellently made with a view to giving a just apportionment to each, without impairing the colossal fabric of the firm. But as no provision was directly made there—except in the creation of a trust fund the purpose of which was not explained, but which Sebastian was to administer in connection with that other burden which had been laid upon the shoulders of the younger brother,—interminable complications seemed likely to result. In addition to his weight of care and responsibility, he was haunted by that grim spectre of the past.

With this double burden upon him, Sebastian had had to endure, with what patience he might, the almost daily visit of Alfred to the office, with inane inquiries of his own, or

more pointed ones of his wife, which all too frequently interrupted or interfered with some difficult or delicate negotiation. Besides, it had come to his knowledge that whispers, on the part of Mrs. Alfred, were going the rounds of their friends and acquaintances, with some such innuendo as the following:

"It is such a heavy burden for that poor Sebastian, left with all that immense concern upon his shoulders! Of course the dear fellow is completely at sea. He was so accustomed to depend upon his father! And, though it sadly interferes with Alfred's legal pursuits—he has such a large practice,—he is obliged to go down to the office almost every day."

A friend of the family sometimes, listening with a kind of half-credence to this account, which had the air of being perfectly natural, put in the question:

"But what about Louis? He is a very bright, level-headed fellow."

The answer invariably was to the effect that Louis was not experienced in business, abhorred its very name, and therefore could not be persuaded to take any trouble at all about how things were going, or to sacrifice himself as Alfred was doing.

Now, all this was well calculated, as Sebastian was fully aware, especially in these times of financial disturbance, to shake the credit of Wilmot & Co. For nothing could make customers, or those who had negotiations of any

sort with the firm, more distrustful than to hear that he who was supposed to be at the head of affairs was suspected of incompetency by his own family. As Sebastian knew, there was, however, nothing to be done but to live down in silence these mischievous reports. He did not even think it worth while, during that interview with Louis, to protest against them. And the latter, having had his say, and extorted a half promise from his brother that he would go away after this time of stringency was over, took his departure.

Sebastian, being left alone, locked the door of his office and found relief, as it were, in throwing off the mask and breathing freely. He brought to light the spectre of that cruel knowledge, and examined it once more in all its bearings,—no longer from the written page, which lay securely in its hiding-place, but from its hideous details which were stamped and burned upon his memory. That silence to which he had voluntarily pledged himself had been acting as a corrosive upon his nature, eating into its hiddenmost recesses, burning and searing. Often he cried out to himself that by far the easier and perhaps the better way would be to make it all known, at least to the younger members of the family; and, while sparing his mother, to obtain their help and co-operation. But he could not bear the thought of the wonder and the horror that would cloud Margie's innocent little face at

that revelation, with all its attendant consequences,—and just when she had brightened and revived under the cheering message that the priest had brought, and had found consolation in her now serene and confident prayers for her father. He told himself that he could never let Margie know, unless some definite emergency should arise. He tormented himself in thinking of her possible marriage, when these circumstances should, in all honor, be made known to her prospective husband.

As regarded Alfred, the young man dismissed the idea of the older brother with a kind of angry impatience. He could imagine his dull wonder, his incredulity, his suspicion (fomented by his wife) that Sebastian might be inventing all this for some purpose of his own; and finally his dismay, and his disposition to blurt it all out, or at least to hasten with the intelligence to his wife. And Sebastian could not endure the thought that she should ever be informed of this cloud, holding portentous elements of sorrow and disgrace, that hung over them. Louis was the only one to whom it might be safely imparted, and to him some day it might have to be told. But even from that ordeal Sebastian shrank. He had, on that night when the tragic secret became his, identified himself, as it were, with his father. The latter's shame and remorse and misery seemed to have been transferred to him; and he could not bear that that parent,

who had made such appeal to him in the mute helplessness of death, should stand condemned before his own children. He fancied that Louis' condemnation might be pitiless. He had not much toleration for weakness. As regarded his mother, he simply could not entertain the thought that she should ever know that in which she was so vitally, so terribly concerned.

The most serious of all the consequences of this secret to Sebastian was that it led him to neglect his religious duties. He had been faithful to them from the time he left college; although, as he always admitted to himself, without that fervor, and that realization of their actual bearing upon life, that had characterized Margie alone of all their household. He persuaded himself now, by a scruple that had attained alarming proportions, that if he went to confession to a priest, and especially to the priest to whom he felt impelled to go, he should have to mention some of the circumstances that had come to his knowledge, and be advised to make the matter known to those concerned, or to take some step which his own judgment would condemn. The fatal defect of his education and the ignorance thus engendered turned him away from religion at the very time when it could have been most serviceable, and from the counsel and help of that holy and experienced adviser who would have been as a strong bulwark in his mental sufferings.

He walked about the room, stopping to look out of the window again, as he had done, in peace and tranquillity of mind, upon that other day while his father was still living and when he himself was a happy ignorance. He saw the busy, diversified panorama of his native city outstretched before him, and the sun, once more tending toward its setting, shining upon the roofs; but it was with eyes to which all things were meaningless, and a face that was pale and haggard from the stress and tumult of his thoughts. When Louis had advised for him a tonic and rest, he had been thinking merely of the business worries and responsibilities; but these were comparatively, as Sebastian felt bitterly, of little moment. They could be faced, as other difficulties had been faced before. Indeed, great difficulties and the hardest of work had usually inspired and invigorated him. Besides, at worst, they would be over; and better days, from a financial and commercial viewpoint, were even now dawning. But that other misfortune loomed the darker with every day that passed. It brought all sorts of complications nearer, and its final solution appeared more problematical than ever.

The young man had gone on making every sort of effort that could be done, with even the most elementary prudence, to discover the truth. He had, in fact, taken risks at which he trembled. Yet the mystery remained in-

soluble; and it began to seem to him, as it had to his father, that Elmira and her child had vanished off the face of the earth.

Now, that very afternoon that Louis had visited Sebastian, and had given him a stronger assurance than ever of his confidence in his capacity; and while Sebastian was enduring an anguish that only a strong nature like his own could have supported,—that very afternoon Margie sat with her mother. The talk turned, as it very often did, upon the vital topic of the management of Wilmot & Co.; and Mrs. Wilmot, while she sewed away in her quick, nervous fashion, deplored what she called Sebastian's wrongheadedness in declining to make more use of Alfred's willing service.

"But that is the way the world over," she remarked; "and when you are as old as I am you will see how true it is that young men always think they can do things better than any one else. Nothing is too big for them to attempt, and so they often end in disaster."

"But, mother," urged Margie, doughtily taking up the cudgels for her favorite brother, "I am perfectly sure that Sebastian can manage the business better than anybody else. He was so much with poor father and learned everything from him."

"No one is the worse," said Mrs. Wilmot, setting her handsome chin obstinately, "for help and advice, and I can't forgive Sebastian for the way he has acted toward Alfred."

"I know Louis has perfect confidence in Sebastian," asserted Margie. "That is why he keeps away and lets him alone."

"Louis hates business and is engrossed in his profession. He is far too selfish to want any additional trouble. And, besides, he hasn't Alfred's legal training. It clears the head wonderfully. And, then," went on the mother, as Margie did not speak, "he is so good-natured! With all he has to do, he goes down there to the firm almost every day. And he gets no thanks at all from Sebastian, who has been so perverse and so moody ever since your father died."

Margie's face flushed crimson.

"O poor Sebastian!" she murmured. "I don't see how any one can say he is perverse or unreasonable."

"There's no use arguing, Margie," said her mother, quite severely. "I know Sebastian's qualities as well as you do. But, where business was concerned, your father spoiled him, and he is suffering from the effects."

So Margie was reduced to a silence that was plainly dissenting; and Mrs. Wilmot, having stitched a seam or two without speaking, began again:

"Caroline was just saying the other day that Alfred had thrown himself into the breach."

At which gentle little Margie retorted:

"She is always trying to thrust herself and Alfred forward!" she said vehemently. "And

I shouldn't mind—none of us would mind—if it weren't breaking Sebastian's heart."

"Margie!" cried her mother.

"Well, I mean worrying him to death," said the little creature; "and he has so much on his mind. Oh, it's too bad!"

She got up and hastily left the room, as if she were afraid that she might be led into saying too much. And her mother, with an angry look that marred the regular beauty of her face, sat and wondered. She was more struck than she would have liked to admit by Margie's contention. But she set it down as the natural partiality of a sister for a brother with whom, of all the three, she had been most brought into contact; and also to a certain jealousy of the sister-in-law, who had gained such a footing in the household and was so frequent a companion of the mother.

And Mrs. Wilmot, then and afterward, continued to adhere to her own opinion, and to support Alfred against his brother and against Louis. It is possible, indeed, that the jealousy she had ascribed to Margie was not absent from the antagonism which, as something entirely new, she had shown to her youngest son ever since his father's death. It is possible, too, that something of that constraint and even fear that had stood for many years between David Wilmot and his wife had been transferred to Sebastian; and that his relations with his mother had suffered from a perpetual dread

lest by some word or act he might break that silence, or violate that secret which, save for himself, his father had carried with him from that household to his grave.

In fact, in that typically modern household, where individualism may be said to have run riot, and to have trampled down in its course many precious flowers of family affection and of mutual confidence, and where the spiritual had been in nearly all its members obscured by the material, there was no common rallying place in the dissensions that followed upon the father's death. In Sebastian's bitter trials, Margie was almost his sole reliance; though he was grateful for the negative attitude of Louis and his refusal to range himself with the malcontents.

VII.

SEBASTIAN had only one distinct memory of Dorothy Kent, and that was as she impressed his mind on the first evening of their meeting. His sister Margie had met her before, and spoken of her with some enthusiasm; but the brother had not seen her until that evening of Mrs. Rollins' reception. It was almost the first time since the mourning that Margie had gone out to any large or formal festivity; and Sebastian had perforce accompanied her. Society as a rule had no particular charm for him; though there were certain elements in his nature that, had they not been repressed by circumstances, might have made him its ardent votary.

"Who is that?" he asked of Margie, who, seeing him standing against the wall, had come to ask why he was not dancing.

Margie looked in the direction indicated.

"Why, that is the very girl I was telling you about. She is from the South. Isn't she lovely and—different?"

"Different? Yes," Sebastian said slowly; "but about the lovely I am not so sure. In that gray gown, with its touches of silver, she looks like a spirit of the mist, or something that might vanish."

"I thought, Mr. Sebastian," cried Margie, "that you never noticed dress!"

"I notice that one because of the wearer."

Margie looked at her brother, and saw his dark eyes fixed upon the girl, with a new expression of keen and vivid interest.

"Would you like to know her?" she asked.

"Surely I should!" replied her brother, in his half-jesting way. "But you must go and ask her. She may have no desire to know me."

Margie had very little doubt upon that subject; but she crossed the room on her mission, leaving Sebastian to study more in detail the clear paleness, which, save for the light flush of excitement, had a transparent look, and the eyes that were luminous, as though a lamp had been lit behind them.

"I may introduce you," said Margie, returning. "And you know she is Mrs. Rollins' companion."

"Lucky Mrs. Rollins!" cried Sebastian, whimsically.

"As I was telling you the other day," explained Margie, "Mrs. Rollins thinks the world of her. They are old family friends, of course; and she thinks her so clever and charming."

"It is hard to discover a real butterfly among your sex," rejoined Sebastian, speaking, as Margie thought, irrelevantly. "They always turn out to be something quite different."

"Now, Sebastian," admonished Margie, as they made their way through the crowded

room to that point where Miss Kent was standing, "do be nice, and don't look bored as you sometimes do, and as if you couldn't take the trouble to talk to a girl."

His eyes were eager, shining, as in moments of strong interest they were apt to be. Before they reached their destination, however, he turned with his usual consideration, and said to Margie:

"But if she should consent to dance with me, I must not leave you alone."

"Oh, no! I am engaged for the next. I see my partner coming in search of me now."

Meanwhile Mrs. Rollins, who had caught something of this little byplay and had heard Margie Wilmot ask if she might introduce her brother, observed in passing to her companion:

"So, Dorothy, one of the wealthiest young men in the room has asked to be introduced to you. Don't look shocked. He is also very nice. And I want to warn you not to act in your usual fashion."

"Would you—or, rather, would he—prefer that I should act in an unusual fashion?" inquired Dorothy.

"Don't be absurd!" said Mrs. Rollins, passing on as Margie introduced her brother, and went off also with her partner, and Sebastian made his bow.

"I hope," he said, "you haven't the aversion of most of your sex to a serious-minded young man."

"I haven't a very strong aversion to most things," replied the girl, looking up at him with her direct gaze. "I take them as they come; and being serious is, I suppose, better than being what I have sometimes been called—a butterfly. I hope *you* have no prejudice against butterflies?"

"On the contrary," said Sebastian, "I like them. As a boy, I spent a good deal of time chasing them and always in vain."

"I wonder why you should like them?" she remarked slowly, turning her head a little to one side, and considering, as though it were a knotty problem that had to be solved.

"It is easy to see. They are the poetry of motion, the spirit of the flowers."

"You don't sound very serious-minded," said Dorothy.

"One can not always be consistent," argued Sebastian.

"Genuine consistency," answered the girl, "is found only in the real, undiluted butterfly species. It is the serious-minded who are inconsistent."

"You," said Sebastian, gravely, "are delightful. I hope you won't mind my saying what you must have heard often."

"One hears all sorts of things," replied Dorothy.

"I know," confessed Sebastian, "that it would be more usual to keep such thoughts to myself, at least until further acquaintance,

and to think them in solitude over a cigar. But, as I spend a good deal of time alone, I have caught the trick of thinking aloud."

"One may as well say what is pleasant to hear," Dorothy declared in her soft Southern accent. "It is only ugly and bitter thoughts that should not be spoken."

Sebastian was half startled.

"That is a very wise saying for a butterfly," he commented. "But I always had an idea that it was a very estimable insect."

"Restless, fickle, inconstant," said Dorothy, shaking her head; "alive only in the sunshine, dying when clouds of adversity come."

"But it has performed its mission of giving joy and brightness," argued Sebastian.

"We are on a strange subject," said Dorothy. "Let us change it, or we shall become philosophical or metaphysical, or something, and didn't somebody say that metaphysics means two people talking together, neither of whom knows what the other is talking about?"

She stopped and looked for a moment round the room, where luxury was paramount. Those brilliantly lighted apartments were idyllic in their furnishing, everything having cost thought as well as money; so that people said it was an artistic education to go to Mrs. Rollins'. Almost from the farthest parts of the earth things had been gathered together; and yet they were so unobtrusive in their arrangement that it seemed as if they had come thither

haphazard. The costumes of the women, the profusion of flowers,—everything spoke of wealth, but wealth controlled and directed by taste and education.

“It is bad manners to talk about oneself,” resumed Dorothy; “but do you know that I am the very poorest person in this room?”

“Are you really?” said Sebastian, with interest.

“I am the only one of all those girls you see here that can not have a new gown whenever she chooses.”

Sebastian looked at the soft gray gown that had attracted his admiration, and that seemed to lend her a distinction amongst all those other creations that were shining and shimmering about him.

“I rather pride myself on my poverty. It makes me unique here,” she added.

“That is one point of view, certainly,” said Sebastian. “And, in one sense, poverty means being care-free.”

“In one sense, perhaps,” admitted Dorothy, her eyes darkening with some inner feeling; “but not in another,—not in a hundred ways! They say you are rich, so probably you don’t know anything about it,—its shifts and its devices and its contrivances. One good thing, though: it gives plenty of opportunity for laughing at oneself.”

“And that,” observed Sebastian, approvingly, “would be an original kind of diversion.”

"Oh!" said the girl, "you have really missed a good deal in being rich,—all sorts of experiences that you can never have otherwise, and that make people interesting."

"They certainly do," replied Sebastian, bowing gravely to her.

"As a rule," continued Dorothy, "rich people are uninteresting,—cut too much on the same pattern."

"It is a pleasant pattern, though—for themselves, I mean," said Sebastian.

"I suppose so," agreed the girl; "though it might be monotonous, after all, having everything one wanted, and—"

"Then you wouldn't care to be rich?" Sebastian inquired, with a curious sense of disappointment.

"Why, of course I should!" cried Dorothy. "That is one of the pleasures of being poor—that you can wish you were rich and can imagine what you would do if you had money, and wish for this and wish for that,—things you will never have."

"Beautiful women can nearly always realize such wishes," remarked Sebastian, impulsively.

But Dorothy took no notice of the remark, pursuing rather her own odd train of thought.

"Still, after all, when one's wish is granted, it's very much the same as if it had not been granted. Something else is longed for instead, and so life passes."

"It has not passed very far with you," said Sebastian, with a smile.

"It is rude to refer to a woman's age," responded Dorothy; "but I don't mind telling you that I am just twenty."

"You have, let me see, about eight years the advantage of me," answered Sebastian.

"So you are twenty-eight?" observed Dorothy. "I think you look even younger."

"I wonder what else you think of me," Sebastian ventured.

"I haven't had time to think much yet," Dorothy responded,— "we have been so busy talking."

"I wonder what conclusion you will reach when you have time to think me over," laughed Sebastian,— "that is, if I am not presumptuous in supposing that you will give me a thought at all."

"Oh, yes, I shall!" answered Dorothy, decidedly. "I always think over the people I have met. I shall remember some of the things that you said, and that you are rather outspoken and a little different, and that you are a trifle unconventional in the matter of paying compliments."

"And very much in earnest," added Sebastian. "But I hope, when I see you next, that you will tell me what were your final impressions."

"Perhaps I shall never tell you."

"That would be cruel."

"It might be very kind," laughed Dorothy, all the gravity gone out of her face now, till it wore a mocking, almost elfish expression.

"No, it wouldn't," Sebastian argued, good-humoredly; "because I should like to listen to your opinion of me, even if it were the worst."

"If it were the worst," suggested Dorothy, "it would very soon end our acquaintance."

"Oh, I hope it won't be as bad as that!" said Sebastian. "For, indeed, I am looking forward to our better acquaintance."

"That all depends—" replied the girl, knitting her brows.

"If it depends on anything I can think or say or do," said Sebastian, lightly, "it will certainly go on forever and ever."

"For a rich man," observed Dorothy, "you are very unconventional, and, I think, just a little bold. One doesn't make such remarks on a first acquaintance."

"Only when they are impelled by some unusual attraction."

"Still," said Dorothy, after a slight pause, "it seems to me that I like you a little. And now I am going to ask you to tell me your first name,—not that I am going to call you by it, but in thinking over people it is more convenient."

"My name is Sebastian."

"Oh, I like that!" said Dorothy, joyously. "It is so different! I have never known any

one of that name. When I was a child I used to love the saint,—a splendid soldier of the Empire, standing up to die for his Faith, and pierced all over with arrows. That would be a glorious thing to do. But I am afraid you are not a very great saint yet.”

“No,” answered Sebastian; “and I haven’t even the distinction of being a very great sinner.”

“Oh, that is no distinction at all!” said Dorothy, decidedly. “Any one can be that. It is like going down a toboggan track.”

Sebastian laughed aloud.

“Well, I’m glad my name at least is a recommendation,” he said. “I have something for which to thank my sponsors,—though I fear I don’t know much about my patron saint.”

“That is a shame!” replied Dorothy. “If you lived at our house, you would know. My mother is as familiar with every saint in the calendar as if he or she were a personal friend.”

The remark struck Sebastian, and gave him a curious pang.

“And your name,” he asked,—“if I may ask it, just for the convenience of thinking it over?”

The girl laughed.

“My name is Dorothy.”

“A charming name.”

“It means ‘Gift of God,’” said the girl. “And my saint is most attractive. Don’t you

remember how, after her martyrdom, she sent the flowers and fruits from Paradise to the unbelieving lawyer?"

But Sebastian was lamentably ignorant; and, somehow, he felt ashamed of his ignorance as he listened to this style of conversation, that seemed so strangely inappropriate to the surroundings.

"Margie," he observed, with a certain pride in being able to say so, "could talk by the hour about those things."

"While Mr. Sebastian is too busy," the girl said. "But Margie—that is your sister—is the most attractive person I have met since I came here."

Sebastian flushed with pleasure.

"Margie," he said, "if a slang phrase will express it, is 'all right.' I know you and she will be great friends."

"We are already," answered Dorothy. "And now I see my partner coming; so good-bye, Mr. Sebastian Wilmot!"

She extended her hand in farewell.

"I hope I shall see you soon again," said Sebastian, lingering.

"Impossible to tell. I am at Mrs. Rollins' service,—being, as perhaps you know, her companion."

"Do you like that occupation?"

"I love her," said Dorothy.

And, her partner coming up, she was spirited away, leaving Sebastian to take his place

once more at the wall and to smile over her sayings. Presently, seeing that his hostess was alone, he went over to have a word with her. In the course of conversation, Mrs. Rollins, whom he had known almost since boyhood, asked:

“How do you like my little friend, Miss Kent?”

“‘Admire’ would express one’s sentiments regarding her, I should think,” answered Sebastian.

“Yes,” said the hostess, “she has a great deal of character. I am glad you appreciate that; for she is the truest and bravest little soul. The family has had misfortunes to no end. They were such a happy and united family when I first knew them. But everything seemed to change with the father’s death. One brother was killed in the Cuban war; another, who was an engineer, was killed in a mine explosion. One sister is a nun, and another married away off in Mexico. The mother, who is what Catholics call a saint, and one of the most lovable women I have ever met, is exceedingly delicate. The other children are younger, and Dorothy is keeping them at school. As there is one sister at home to take care of the mother, I persuaded Dorothy to give up the typewriting she was doing, and come to New York for a winter at least. She went away once before as companion—it really pays her better,—but she can not bear to be long absent from home, and I fancy she had

a singular experience that time. Of course I am delighted to have her here as long as she will stay. Apart from her personality and my friendship for the family, she is invaluable in the house. She always has her wits about her, and she is handy and capable in so many ways."

"I can quite believe all that," said Sebastian, slowly. "She certainly has, as you say, a most attractive personality."

"The man who marries her will be lucky," said Mrs. Rollins, decidedly.

"Is there *a* man or is it only *the* man?" Sebastian asked, with some eagerness.

"I don't think there is any one in particular, so far as she is concerned. Her mother told me of one or two men in the South, and she certainly has been very much admired since she came here."

"That goes without saying," replied Sebastian. Then Mrs. Rollins exclaimed:

"My dear Sebastian, how I wish, for both your sakes that you would be that man, though everyone says you are not a marrying man!"

Sebastian pondered upon this statement, while into his mind came surging those dark thoughts that made it seem impossible he should ever marry.

"The most vital question," said the young man, laughing in order to give a light turn to the conversation, "would be Miss Kent's feelings on that subject."

"A question," said Mrs. Rollins, "which of

course she alone could answer. But you are so accustomed to succeed—”

“Not in affairs of this kind.”

“You have never tried.”

“Well—perhaps not; but I know my limitations.”

Mrs. Rollins laughed, and tapped him on the arm with her fan.

“You know your advantages very well, too, and that few girls would be so foolish as to refuse you.”

“Refuse what I could offer,” said Sebastian, a little bitterly. “Even were that the case, it would not be very flattering to my self-esteem.”

“I don’t mean any such thing,” rejoined his hostess, warmly. “Even apart from that, if I had a daughter, you are just the sort of man I should choose for her.”

“And very likely the sort she wouldn’t choose for herself,” laughed Sebastian. “But it is hardly probable that I shall inflict myself upon any one for some time to come, at least. I have too many irons in the fire.”

“Take care they don’t burn you,” said Mrs. Rollins, warningly; for she thought he was looking both thinner and paler.

“Yes, some of them are burning me already. But where’s the remedy?”

This conversation left upon the mind of the astute lady two distinct impressions. The first was that Sebastian, who was usually indifferent

to young women in society, had taken, in that one short interview, a decided fancy to Dorothy; and the second was that Sebastian had more than the cares of business upon his mind, and that something would prevent, for the present at least, her secret plan with regard to her protégée being carried into execution. She was of a sanguine temperament, however, and was very far, indeed, from despairing.

VIII.

Now that the first sense of loss and the shock were over, and especially since she had been reassured by the message of the priest as to that vital point which had troubled her more than might have seemed probable, Mrs. Wilmot recovered her ordinary temper of mind and manner of living surprisingly quick. The same things interested her as before, and she had precisely the same point of view. The chief difference was that she perhaps idealized, to some extent, the husband that was dead, and she found her will curiously in opposition, on certain points, to that of her son. And she the more bitterly resented what she had called his obstinacy because he had always been so dutiful, and, more than that, so attentive and devoted to her. It seemed intolerable, therefore, that he should now stand before her, slim and boyish, and as considerate as ever, but with a will far more inflexible than his father's had ever been. In the end she had always been able, save in one particular, to move her slow-going husband; and it was this very matter that now became a chief occasion of conflict between her and Sebastian.

Thus very shortly after Mrs. Rollins' memorable reception, which had brought a new element of interest into Sebastian's life, he was called into conference with his mother. He had had a particularly trying day in the office, and was feeling unusually fagged.

"My dear boy," began the mother, "I want to speak to you about something that has been a good deal on my mind of late."

"Yes, mother," rejoined Sebastian, taking a seat opposite to her, and smiling into the eyes that, in color at least, were like his own. "I hope it is something in which I can help you." But he felt a foreboding, as he always did when his mother became confidential.

"It is about this house. You know I never liked the situation."

Sebastian's brow clouded at once; but his mother went on, unheeding:

"I often broached the subject to your father; but the poor, dear man had grown attached to it, and could never make up his mind to move away."

Sebastian drew a deep breath, and his brows were knitted anxiously.

"From an economical point of view, it is too large for us."

"But, my dear mother," observed Sebastian, laughing, "economy—except, of course, in a general way—has not become a necessity with us."

"No, but it is very foolish to presume upon

that," said Mrs. Wilmot, "and to act as if things were not liable to change, now that your father is gone, as Caroline was saying only the other day."

"A pessimist!" smiled Sebastian. "But should her worst fears be realized, it will be time enough then to consider what we shall do. And surely we could not get a finer house."

"The house is well enough," dissented Mrs. Wilmot, impatiently. "I am sure for my part I should not mind if it were smaller. But the neighborhood, all around us, is becoming worse every day."

Sebastian thought of the Square which he had loved since his boyhood, and which would always give the neighborhood, in that direction at least, a loneliness, an isolation, not easily attainable elsewhere. But he knew that argument as regarded details was useless. There was something much more serious to be considered.

"Even the house I never liked as well as your father did," Mrs. Wilmot went on. "To me it is gloomy; and more so now, of course, with these last sad associations."

"Your preference," said Sebastian, slowly, "would be quite sufficient reason for leaving it, if—"

Mrs. Wilmot's face, which had begun to break into smiles at the beginning of the sentence, darkened at that last syllable, which she knew meant a good deal.

"There is no 'if' about it," she said, sharply. "What I want you to do—and you may as well know it at once—is to sell this house and buy another up town, in the new part of the city, where we can breathe, and be near all our friends."

"The Square gives us a pretty good breathing space," replied Sebastian. "But we need not argue as to details. I wish I could oblige you in this matter; but, as regards the sale of the house, it is impossible."

"Impossible! What nonsense!" cried the mother, angrily. "You are getting beside yourself, with your airs of authority and your mystery, and all that."

Sebastian was silent, and the mother continued:

"There is not a word in the will about it, nor anywhere else, that I can see. I was asking Alfred only yesterday, and he says it could be sold to-morrow."

"I know my father's wishes," answered Sebastian.

"Then you will have to show us some proof of what his wishes were," declared the mother. "I, for one, will not be contented with hearsay. But I know how it is: you are just your father over again." (Now, no two people could be more unlike than the late father and his youngest son,—a fact which at other times she fully acknowledged. But she made the remark merely by way of argument.) "You know that your

father always liked the place; therefore he wanted, and you want, to tie us down here forever. And I suspect that the strongest reason of all is that you like it yourself."

Sebastian's face paled, but he remained otherwise unmoved. There was no answer he could make, no reason he could give, that his mother would be disposed to accept. This, he realized, was the beginning of a new and more acute phase of the struggle that had begun with his father's death.

"The only compromise I can suggest," he said quietly, "is that another house can be bought or rented, wherever you please; but this one can not be sold."

"That is an absurd idea. What would be the sense of keeping this house if we were not living in it? I know perfectly well what Alfred will say to such a proposal; and even Louis, if he condescends to occupy himself with our affairs at all. Caroline, who is a very clear-sighted little woman, and has been talking to a real-estate man, can tell you that such a house as this could not be rented to suitable tenants; but that, on the other hand, it can be easily sold now, and to greater advantage than later."

"I am sorry," said Sebastian, with something that was almost sternness; "but Mrs. Alfred has given herself unnecessary trouble. For, whatever may be any one's opinion of the matter, this house can not be sold."

The mother looked into his face, and for the first time realized that here was a will which, in some matters at least, she could not control.

"I am perfectly willing, however," added Sebastian, meeting her look calmly, "to arrange that you and Margie may live where you please; and you may be quite right about preferring another sort of neighborhood. For myself, I should desire nothing better than to keep intact this house, which has so many associations for me."

"Now the secret of your opposition to my wishes and to the wishes of other members of the family is out!" cried the mother, triumphantly. "That is what I always knew and suspected."

"You are wrong there, my dear mother," said Sebastian, good-humoredly. "My own inclinations, believe me, have little weight in this affair. Nor, for that matter, need they interfere with any one's inclinations. I could afford to purchase this house for myself, and should like to do so; but, unhappily, it can not be sold."

The conversation was interrupted at this juncture by a gentle tap at the door; and Mrs. Alfred, opening it softly, put her head into the room.

"I do hope," she said, "that I am not disturbing anybody?"

"Of course not. I am very glad you came," rejoined the mother-in-law.

Sebastian, who had risen at her entrance, placed a chair for her. He thought she was looking remarkably well in her new mourning, which suited her slender, almost attenuated, figure. She was smiling as usual,—that smile which produced infinitesimal wrinkles in a complexion that, fair as it was, had, somehow, the appearance of having been withered.

"I heard you talking, and I hesitated about coming in," she explained, in her peculiarly sibilant voice; and, going over, she kissed Mrs. Wilmot, and gave her thin, pale hand to Sebastian. The former greeted her cordially; the latter, with good-tempered politeness, which at that moment concealed very different sentiments. In fact, he was sincerely sorry that this ally for the opposition should have appeared upon the scene just when he was anxious to impress upon his mother, with as little argument as possible, the finality of his decision. He was quite aware that his mother, left to herself, might have been ultimately made to hear reason; but supported by Alfred and his wife, who seemed particularly desirous of acting on every occasion in opposition to himself, she would be as adamant.

For a moment Sebastian hoped that nothing further might be said, and he even tried adroitly to change the subject. But it being uppermost in the mother's mind, she immediately

began to acquaint her daughter-in-law with the matter that had been in dispute. The latter listened silently at first, with a look of intelligent attention and sympathy directed toward Mrs. Wilmot; but nodding and smiling occasionally at the young man, to show that he was not outside the circle of her interest. Daughter of diplomacy that she was, she listened to Mrs. Wilmot's arguments, only putting in a word or two from time to time, to imply that, in her opinion, "mother" was always right, and in perfect accord, too, with her own clever Alfred; and that "this dear, foolish younger son" was altogether mistaken in this as in most of his views.

"Of course I know nothing about such things," she said at last; "though I did happen to get a few points from a friend of mine who is in real estate. But Alfred is convinced—and you know he is slow enough in making up his mind—that this house *must* be sold. I suppose, being in the law, he finds out a good many things—that we other people don't know. And he agrees with my friend that its value is greater now than it may ever be again."

"That may very well be," said Sebastian; "and I am not arguing against that point of view. Indeed, I am not arguing at all: I am stating a fact."

"O you dear, dear fellow!" said Mrs. Alfred, shaking a transparent finger at him. "I am afraid that it is just the naughty little spirit

of self peeping out when you oppose your dear mother."

Now, this address, and her manner of making it, would have infuriated many a man, and certainly an antagonist of her own sex; but the youngest of the Wilmot brothers was constitutionally incapable of being angry with a woman, and he maintained an unruffled demeanor, though he was far from having any very cordial feeling toward his brother's wife. He smiled back at her and said:

"You are just as far wrong here as my mother. My own prepossessions have nothing to do with it. I have no choice in the matter but to obey my father's wishes and keep this house."

"I wish your father had made Alfred an executor!" cried Mrs. Wilmot, her face flushing crimson with annoyance.

"I sincerely wish he had made any one else but me executor," said Sebastian, in a tone of such genuine feeling that his mother paused for a moment, and Mrs. Alfred observed him narrowly. "I am quite willing, and I believe capable, of managing the business in all its details."

At that remark Mrs. Alfred fixed him with her bright eyes and her penetrating smile, which said as plainly as words:

"*You* think so, but—"

"But as regards these outside affairs," Sebastian continued, "it is quite another matter."

Mrs. Wilmot had been working herself up

during this interlude to a state of fiery indignation, which caused her to indulge in a somewhat intemperate discourse, in which the dead and the living were somewhat indiscriminately mingled. Sebastian sat before her, abashed that, in presence of a comparative stranger, she should have permitted herself such liberty of speech. Still, he was unmoved in his determination to obey his father's behest, which had come to him in the solemn stillness of that midnight, together with an awful knowledge, the thought of which now filled him with deepest pity, not only for the dead father, but for the living mother, who was speaking thus in ignorance. He had never allowed himself even to feel the temptation, that might have been entertained by a man of weaker mould, to speak once for all and give the reason which prompted his course of action in this as in other affairs. It had seemed to him from the first impossible to inflict such a blow upon his mother; or cast, even in the eyes of his own children, such a stigma upon the memory of his father, who from his grave appealed to him so much more forcibly than he had done in life.

During Mrs. Wilmot's tirade, Mrs. Alfred's smiling, penetrating glance passed from the speaker to the listener, and back again.

"We must get Alfred to settle this dispute," she said at last; "he has the clear mind of the legal temper."

"There is no dispute," Sebastian said gravely, finding it hard by this time to restrain his indignation. "I am the executor of my late father's will. More than that, I am conversant with his last wishes, and they are that this house must not be sold."

And, having said so much, he arose without more ado and left the room. He had an uneasy consciousness of the smiling glance with which Mrs. Alfred would follow his retreating figure; and her gesture, half deprecatory, half commiserating, for the mother of such a son. He drew a deep breath, and went out of the house, that he might brace himself and think undisturbed.

The Square, when he reached it, gave him a sensation of rest in the midst of turmoil. Its living green was an oasis in the desert of brick and mortar. Above his head, the trees waved, making long undulations on the grass, that rippled likewise in the breeze. He strolled about aimlessly, his hat thrust back upon his head, his coat unbuttoned, as if he would avail himself to the uttermost of the fresh, pure air. At the farther end of one of the paths he encountered Margie.

"Halloo, Margie!" he said. "It is good to find you here."

"I came out to avoid some one," she replied. "And you, Sebastian, are looking very tired."

He smiled down into her troubled little face, with its girlish softness of contour and a certain

quaint simplicity that was not without its charm.

"Oh, I'll be all right!" the brother said. "I'm tough, you know."

"I think," the girl went on, "it is a pity you should have so much care and responsibility while you are young."

"Is a full quarter of a century and three years more young?" inquired Sebastian. "And, after all, isn't it better to meet anything that's coming while there is some fight left in one? I can imagine people getting old and weary, so that they don't much care."

"It will be a long time till you are old," said Margie; "but I think you are getting weary already."

"Not a bit of it!" returned the brother, bravely; but, somehow, his look contradicted his words.

"Mrs. Alfred," he remarked presently, "is with mother."

Margie made a gesture.

"I know," she said. "That was why I came out here."

Sebastian laughed.

"For Caroline Wilmot," said the sister, almost fiercely, "is the one person I can not bear. Only for the sin of it, I should simply detest her. And you know I don't hate many things." She waved her hand, as if appealing to the sunlit world around,—the world of birds and of light and shadow in the treetops.

Sebastian laughed again.

"You are lucky," he said, "if there is only one person whom you are tempted to dislike. Now, I know several. There is a man who comes into my office—"

But Margie was not to be turned aside.

"I wish Alfred had never married her," she declared vehemently. "She makes him an echo, to repeat all that she wants to say."

"That's one way of putting it," Sebastian said, "and an original kind of echo. Come, let us sit down here. It is so still."

Margie accepted the invitation; and, realizing that Sebastian did not care to pursue that disagreeable subject, left it for another.

"I have never asked you since," she remarked, "how you got on with Dorothy Kent."

Sebastian was looking away into the distance, and did not at once respond. When he did it was with an effort, which Margie was quick to perceive.

"Oh, very well! She is charming."

"Have you seen her since?" asked Margie; her small, birdlike head poised for information,—simply curious like a child.

"No, I have not seen her since, my inquisitive sister," laughed Sebastian. "I have not dared—"

"Is she so very formidable?"

"Your sex mostly are, especially when rather small, pretty, and intelligent, all in one."

But Margie surmised, with her quick intui-

tions, that her brother was telling her so much and no more; and that, though he had spoken lightly, he had been more than commonly impressed. It gave her a pang; for somehow, she had fancied this brother of hers to be above such mundane weaknesses as falling in love, though why she had never asked herself. For, in point of fact, he was the most lovable, the most human, and possibly the most susceptible to feminine charms, of all her brothers.

"Well," said Margie, drawing a long breath, "she is lovely."

"Very pretty," assented Sebastian.

"And original-looking, — different from others."

"Yes, I think that is a great part of her attraction," agreed the brother. "And do you know, Margie, she reminds me of you?"

"Oh, no! She is not the least like me," said Margie, pleased nevertheless at the idea. "That would be a very poor compliment to her."

"She is small, too,—very little taller than you are; she has something of the same bird-like movements; and, as far as can be judged in so short an acquaintance, she is extremely sympathetic."

Margie was silent for a little while, looking absently at some birds that had flown down from the treetops and were hopping about on the grass. At last she asked:

"Is it likely to go further?"

"Emphatically, no!" said Sebastian, with a

force that startled Margie. "I don't see, however, why I should deny, out here in the open, where there are no prying ears, that I should be glad to go further, if that were not impossible."

"Sebastian," said Margie, tapping his strong brown fingers lightly with her own, "don't be what our old nurse used to call 'play acting.' If you really care for this girl—"

"Now, now," interrupted Sebastian. "You are running on too fast! Caring for some one to whom you have spoken only once is a very different thing from considering what might happen if one were to see her very often. Or perhaps—who knows?—the illusion might wear away."

"It is very likely that you may see her often," declared Margie, "since she and I have adopted each other as friends. But there is no reason on earth, if you should grow to care for her, why you can not marry her."

Sebastian's brow clouded, and his heart was wrung at the remembrance of that reason which Margie could never suspect, and which to his mind was sufficient to prevent him from thinking of Dorothy Kent or any one else. And he felt that it behooved him to be careful of reaching that stage where he might be tempted to break silence, and to trust that the revelation might not make marriage an impossibility. He said, however, in a voice that sounded quite composed and ordinary:

"My dear Margie, your family partiality makes you serenely confident of my charms."

"I am serenely conscious of your advantages," the girl said; and forthwith she began to check them off.

Sebastian exclaimed impatiently:

"I hope that she is not the sort of girl to be bought like a bale of goods!"

"Everyone is nowadays," Margie responded, with a cynicism that sat oddly upon her.

"You are not, Margie," exclaimed Sebastian,—*"not on your life!"*

"I don't know," said Margie; "for, you see, I have never been poor. That is the test."

Sebastian, looking down reflectively, surveyed the gravel at his feet.

"Yes, I suppose that would be the test," he admitted; "and of course she is poor. But, happily, the problem does not concern me; for if she be for sale, I can not be a purchaser." Then he threw off his flippancy. "Heavens, what a way to talk about such a creature as that," he cried, "who I daresay wouldn't look at me!"

But Margie smiled with superior sagacity, and with an incredulity that was addressed once more to the treetops and the birds soaring above their heads.

"So things are best as they are," Sebastian concluded; "and I am a fool to talk of the matter at all, or to moan about what can't be helped."

He had spoken thus strongly because he had a feeling that, in loyalty to the girl, since she had been brought into question at all, he ought to give Margie to understand that it was from no lack in her that he refused to press his suit. And this impression he had been very successful in conveying. In fact, Margie's feminine imagination carried her further than Sebastian had gone himself.

"I think you are very absurd," she declared, "if you are making yourself unhappy for nothing."

"Oh, it is not for nothing, Margie!" he answered. "I wish to God it were!"

She saw coming into his face again the strained, harassed look that it had worn when she first met him on the path, and a pang shot through her heart. Since his father's death she had found him different in many ways; and she had supposed that he had missed his parent's companionship, and felt oppressed by the burden of responsibility that had been left on his shoulders.

"But, my dear little girl," he said, "you are not to suppose that I am quite so ridiculous as to make myself unhappy over a girl, however charming, to whom I spoke for an hour in a drawing-room. The truth is, I have many things to worry me. And, by the way, Margie, you will support me in the struggle that is on at present, and is likely to continue, about the house?"

"I know," Margie said in a low voice, "mother would like to get away from here. And perhaps it is natural after what has happened."

She paused and looked up into his face with a new timidity. Its expression was stern and set.

"And, then, you know, mother never liked the place."

"But it can't be sold, Margie," he cried, "no matter what the reasons may be! And I want you, at least, to believe that I am acting in this way not from choice but from compulsion."

"And acting rightly, too, I'm sure," said Margie. "And I know that that woman has been worrying you to-day."

"If it were only she!" Sebastian murmured, under his breath. "But come! I have been spoiling this lovely day for you, and this nice, quiet time in the Square. And now it is about time to go into the house."

"Yes, I suppose it is," agreed Margie, seeing how the shadows had begun to fall.

And together the two walked back through the Square, wherein they had played as children and pretended all sorts of things. They stopped once or twice as they went, and asked: "Do you remember?"—smiling into each other's faces, but not with the smile of long ago.

At the door they paused in silence just for a second or two, to look back upon the scene

they had quitted; the silence broken by the jingle of car bells and the noise of a city's traffic.

"Mother is right," said Sebastian, abruptly; "and I really suppose that, for her and you, it is time to move away. But there is no appeal from the fact that the house can not be sold."

Now, though Margie naturally wondered why this should be so, she loyally accepted her brother's judgment.

"You will give me what help you can," said Sebastian.

And Margie cheerfully gave her promise.

She felt a little sore of heart at the half confidence he had made her concerning Dorothy Kent, since she saw that there was danger of never being first again with that brother; and she was not a little mystified by his way of regarding a possibility that would seem so ordinary and natural to a perfectly independent young man of wealth and position. Margie was above all else sensible, and she did not like what seemed to her either useless mystery or affectation. Of this latter she was loath to accuse Sebastian, who had always been pre-eminently natural and straightforward.

Sebastian passed on upstairs; and Margie stood a moment in the hall, wondering whether or no the enemy had taken her departure.

"Ah!" said Mrs. Alfred's voice behind her,—giving her arm at the same time an affec-

tionate little squeeze. "I was watching Sebastian and you out there in the Square, like a pair of conspirators."

Now, it must be owned that Margie pulled her arm away with considerable abruptness, as she said almost viciously:

"I wish Sebastian were a conspirator! It would be better for himself!"

IX.

DR. LOUIS WILMOT had chosen his dwelling in the East End, rather with a view to professional profit than to desirability of location. The block in which stood that modest brick edifice was quiet enough, and free from objectionable features. But close at hand, on Second Avenue, noise and overcrowding and squalor ran riot. It was, however, from that pandemonium that he hoped to gain himself a livelihood, independent of anything that should come from the gray-walled and blue-shaded emporium. And, that moderate ambition having been satisfied, he craved much more. Like Sebastian, he had aspirations. He wanted to become known as a skilful physician, at first of a metropolitan fame, which should afterward become cosmopolitan and even international. He had become interested, too, in some of those cases which his professional acumen had restored to vigor, had cured of disease, or had brought back to normal conditions after an accident. He listened, with an interest that was by no means entirely feigned, to life stories, expressed in Yiddish, in the rich brogue of Cork or Kerry, in English that

was charged with Teutonic, or softened into melody by Tuscan or Neapolitan tongue.

His heart and soul were in his profession, and its calls upon him became more persistent as his reputation increased. Moreover his leisure was largely spent in making experiments in his laboratory, or plunging deep into scientific treatises, and testing new theories. For all this he required solitude, so that, even apart from the exigencies of his practice, he could never have remained at home. Nor was he of the temper to endure patiently, as Sebastian had done and was still doing, the various elements of discord that entered into the home.

As his housekeeper, Louis had Mrs. Rosanna Mullin, who had also been his nurse. "She's the dynamo of my establishment," he used to say. "She keeps everything going." She certainly left nothing undone that could ensure the young man's well-being; and she gave to that dwelling, which might otherwise have been dreary, an air of comfort and geniality that was instantly perceptible. She had come into the Wilmot family when Louis was a baby, and him she consequently idolized; extending her affections also to Sebastian and Margie, but refusing to make them retroactive; so that she always spoke with a certain note of disparagement in her voice about Alfred and "them others that are dead." By this latter allusion she meant a little brother and

sister who had folded their wings early and taken a short flight to paradise.

Whatever height of virtue or of excellence these might have attained was as nothing to Rosanna. It was enough that they belonged to that mystic past when she was not in charge at the Wilmots'. And whatever defects were to be found in Alfred—his want of what she called energy, and even his marrying "a poor wisp of a thing,"—were credited by her to his misfortune in having seen the light "before her time." She had her own theories about the bringing up of children; and such good ones they were that they had tended to neutralize in the younger members of the family some of the vicious defects in their early training. It almost seemed, however, as if she exaggerated her own influence, and ascribed thereto Louis' success in his profession, and Sebastian's still more notable prominence in the mercantile world.

So far as all household details were concerned, she ruled Louis' house with an absolute sway. As regarded himself, however, her rule was all honey and sugar. To her he was as much "Nanna's darlin' boy" as he had been when she dandled him on her knees. In her thoughts, Sebastian and Margie were always the "wee ones," and affectionately welcomed as if they had come—as a half-score of years previously they might have done—to play with their brother.

"My mother is coming to dinner this evening," Louis announced to his housekeeper one morning, as he was preparing to set out in his motor for a round of professional visits.

"I'm glad to hear it," said Rosanna, who was always hospitably inclined. "It's not very often she comes."

Her tone, though assenting, was cool. She had never been very enthusiastic regarding her late mistress. There had been points on which their views clashed, so that when they were in the house together, there were whole weeks at a time when it was armed neutrality. Both sides, however, strove to endure, for the sake of the children. Yet Rosanna had strong notions as to the fitness of things, and knew that it behooved Mr. Louis to offer hospitality to his maternal parent; also she took pride in the "fine, portly Madam" who had presided over the Wilmot mansion; and she often expressed admiration for Margie's "pretty red cheeks like your Mamma's there,"—to the disparagement of Mrs. Alfred, who 'looked as if a puff of wind would blow her away.' In fact, the dame could be caustic enough in her criticisms except for those she loved, and these latter she was inclined to praise inordinately.

"Won't the childer—I mean Mr. Sebastian and Miss Margie—be comin', too?" she asked of Louis.

"Not this evening," he answered. "Mr. Sebastian is far too busy. And, besides, I

don't want to overtax you, Rosanna; for Mr. Alfred will be coming."

"And the Madam, I suppose?" queried Rosanna, with a distinctly acid tone in her voice.

"Of course, of course!" said Louis. "If one comes, so will the other. But Mr. Alfred could not be sure because his wife is out."

"Oh, wirra, wirra," cried Rosanna, "what were they thinkin' of at all that brought him up and left him with no mind of his own?" She cast up her eyes to the ceiling, as though she were addressing some invisible presence.

Louis, suppressing a smile, continued:

"If my brother rings up while I'm gone, just say it will be all right. I leave everything to you, Rosanna."

"If Mr. Alfred is allowed to accept his own brother's invitation!" said Rosanna. "Well, I'll just say that you'll be happy to see them. And as for the dinner, they'll have eaten worse in their day."

"And few better," said Louis, descending to cajolery.

"My heart's just broke about Mr. Sebastian," continued Rosanna, "he's lookin' that pale and thin."

"It is the natural result of the overwork he has been doing. I have ordered him—professionally, of course,—to take a rest. He'll be all right after that."

But Rosanna shook her head and heaved a sigh.

"I'm afraid he's being harassed and worried," she said, "and that's worse nor any work. But the worst thing at all," added the old woman, drawing near her young master and speaking impressively, "is that he's begun to stay away from his Church and his God, just like the poor man that's gone."

Louis looked genuinely startled. From certain defects in his early training, he was not any more innately religious than the rest of the family, always with the exception of Margie. But since he had been living here, in the white heat of Rosanna's Celtic faith, and had observed, moreover, upon his patients the relative effects of religion and irreligion, he had held steadfastly enough to the precepts of the Church,—to that creed which Rosanna, probably even more than his mother, had implanted in him in childhood, and which his years at a Catholic college had nourished. He realized to the full what such a deterioration would mean in a character like Sebastian's. More than that, he became aware, as by a flash of intuition, that something was the matter. Sebastian was not of the type that would allow fatigue or worry or overstrain to prevent him from fulfilling duties which had become second nature to him. And certainly such a result could not have been produced by the shock of his father's sudden death, without religious helps, which had seemed to grieve Sebastian inordinately, until his doubts upon

that point had been satisfactorily cleared up. Rather should it have acted in a contrary direction.

It was this psychological problem, therefore, that agitated Louis even more than the question of religion. Something had jarred the fine mechanism of his brother's moral structure. The physician was well aware that men grow careless from their surroundings or from pressure of affairs, but it is a gradual process. Few, if any, in his experience had suddenly abandoned the practice of their religion without some strong determining cause. He felt sincerely concerned, especially as his regard for Sebastian was greater than for any other member of the family. To Rosanna, however, he said:

"I am sorry to hear this, but I don't very well see what can be done. It's a subject upon which I can not speak to my brother."

"That's true enough," replied Rosanna. "It would be no use even for his mamma to speak."

"No, no, of course not," said Louis, hastily; while Rosanna silently reflected that there might have been times when mamma could have spoken with some effect and had failed to do so. That had been, indeed, one of the points upon which the old nurse and she had clashed.

"I think Miss Margie will be the one to speak," Rosanna remarked at last.

But Louis had the same horror of interfer-

ing in Sebastian's private affairs that he would have had of any one's interfering in his own.

"I don't think," he said, "it would be wise for any one to speak. Sebastian is of an age to manage his own business."

"But isn't it the business of everyone that has his good at heart to save him from destruction?" argued Rosanna.

"I don't see how it can be done, though," Louis answered; "and if Miss Margie is in ignorance on this point it would be better to leave her so."

"But you may be sure she'll find it out sooner or later."

"If she does, it can't be helped. But I beg of you not to speak to her on the subject."

"Well, I'll be bid by you for the present," said Rosanna, reluctantly. "But mind you, Mr. Louis dear, there's them that sins by silence."

"Breaking silence just now would do no good," persisted the Doctor, closing the door of the house after him to prevent further discussion, and climbing into what Rosanna, who was watching him from the window, called "that newfangled machine that's like one of them things in the prophecies of St. Malachy."

The honest soul was, indeed, deeply perturbed by the intelligence—which had been conveyed to her through a servant in the Wilmot household, who was a cousin of her own—that Mr. Sebastian had given up going to church. For,

as is often the case, the domestic had discovered this fatal remissness in one of her employers before it had become known even to his nearest relatives. Rosanna had sharply reproved the servant for carrying tales from the house in which she lived; but she had hoped to profit by the knowledge, through the advice of Louis and the more active co-operation of Margie.

"Well, I can say my Beads for the poor lamb, anyway," she decided; "and what can be better than to have the Mother of God taking the case into her own holy hands? Wirra, wirra, who'd ever think it of Mr. Sebastian!"

When, with its noise and its chemical odor, the machine—which Rosanna detested, because she fancied that it put her beloved Mr. Louis in daily peril of his life—had disappeared round a corner, the housekeeper set to work to prepare for her grand dinner. To do her justice, she would have spared no trouble to put "a good meal upon the table," no matter who was coming, let alone Mr. Louis' mother, who was entitled to the best. But with the probable advent of Mrs. Alfred, she was spurred on to that emulation which is as often the product of hate as of love. She labored to have everything particularly nice for this woman, even more than she would have done for the beloved Miss Margie; for, whereas the latter was pleased with everything, the former Rosanna knew to be both finical and censorious, and

sure to notice the dying fly no matter how excellent the ointment.

Before Louis had been long gone, a phone message came—not from Alfred himself, but from his wife—saying that it would be quite convenient for them to dine that evening with Dr. Wilmot.

“And the Doctor bid me say,” answered Rosanna, in her tartest voice, “that he’ll be happy to see Mr. Alfred and his lady this evening at half-past six.”

Dropping the receiver, she added under her breath: “God forgive me, but I’d be happy if she never darkened the door!” And she laughed noiselessly to herself as she took her way to the kitchen.

X.

THAT family gathering passed off as such gatherings generally do, the only ripple on its smooth surface being the host's carefully veiled antagonism to one of his guests. Louis, of course, was all devotion to his mother, and adopted a lightly jocular but perfectly cordial tone toward his brother. To his brother's wife, the attitude, then as always, was different. The politeness was too evident; the attention, too much what would be offered to a stranger. The astute Mrs. Alfred was perfectly aware of this circumstance; and on that evening, more even than was her wont, she spared Louis the cajolery which it was her habit to expend upon all others who came in her way. She was always a little afraid of that brusqueness of his, that struck out suddenly as one might strike with a concealed weapon. On this occasion she accepted the terms upon which she was placed by her brother-in-law, and her smiling effusiveness fell from her as a mask. She was grave and composed, meeting her host's glance with an inscrutable look, and almost invariably permitting him to take the initiative in the conversation.

"She is much more tolerable in this mood,"

Louis said. "I wish she would make it habitual. It removes the temptation I usually have in her company to become profane."

Nothing, therefore, occurred to mar the harmony of that dinner, admirably served as well as cooked by Rosanna herself,—for she would never permit another servant in the house. She passed around the table with the stately mien of a duchess, her demeanor perfectly graded according to her sentiments toward each of the guests. Her courtesy to Mrs. Alfred was magnificent, and when the dinner was done, and that lady felt called upon to compliment her upon her culinary triumphs, the tone and manner of Rosanna's replies gave Louis an inclination to uncontrollable mirth.

"I'm glad my cookin' is pleasin' to you, ma'am."

"Isn't it wonderful, Rosanna, how you have learned to cook?"

"Askin' your pardon, ma'am, it would be more wonderful if I hadn't learned, seeing the many years I've spent in the kitchen."

Mrs. Alfred thought it prudent to retreat under cover of her most engaging smile, to which Rosanna made no response.

"I expect she's a Tartar, that good old Rosanna," said she to Mrs. Wilmot.

"No, no!" answered Mrs. Wilmot, surprised at this observation. "I wouldn't call her *that*, though she has some peculiarities of temper."

"Once confess now, dear mother, that it was only your own amiability that enabled you to put up with her!"

Mrs. Wilmot smiled the gratification which she could not help feeling at this compliment,—which, indeed, in the main was deserved. For it is no small tribute to have one's amiability attested by a daughter-in-law.

"I used to find Rosanna trying at times," she said; "she was so set in some things, and so religious that I believe she would have had every one of the boys priests if she had had her way."

"And what would have become of poor little me in that case?" said Mrs. Alfred.

The mother-in-law smiled indulgently.

"Oh, Alfred was never nearly so much under her thumb as the others!" Mrs. Wilmot declared. "He always clung to me. And, of course, it is a good thing to be religious. I'm sure I wish I were a hundred times more pious than I am."

"You are just right as you are—the dearest of mothers!" said Mrs. Alfred. "And surely your boys are good enough."

"Well, I think so," the elder lady murmured. But there was a slight hesitation in her tone. She had been less certain upon that subject since the death of her late husband.

"And if dear father wasn't much of a church-goer—why, everybody can't be a saint—"

"Like our little Margie," observed the mother,

reflectively. When she was a child, I used to be positively afraid that she was not going to live. At last I forbade Rosanna to take her to church except on Sundays. And only for her father, who thought convents were the best place for girls, I should never have let her go near the Sisters."

Mrs. Alfred, waiving the subject of Margie, continued her eulogy of the dead:

"Poor father was so good,—far better than some of those who are running to church all the time!"

"He certainly was a good, kind father," agreed the widow, with a sigh. "Yet I often used to wish I could persuade him to go to church, and it gave me such a shock when I thought he had died without preparation. It seemed as if it might have been my fault."

"How could you think such wicked things about yourself!" said Mrs. Alfred, smiling into her face.

"And then I began to believe that Rosanna might have been right about the boys. I used to tell her that too much church-going would disgust them with religion, and she always answered: 'O ma'am dear, you might as well say that you wouldn't let them eat any natural food for fear they'd get disgusted with that.' And David said she was right, because he had been brought up with scarcely any religion at all."

"But wasn't it like Rosanna's impertinence

to talk that way, when the boys had such a perfect mother to look after them?" commented Mrs. Alfred.

"I suppose the mother generally does know best," agreed Mrs. Wilmot; "and I was anxious to do right. But my mother was a Protestant; and Rosanna was older than I, and it might really have been better to let her take her own way."

"One thing is certain," said Mrs. Alfred: "that, treasure as she is, I couldn't have put up with her for all that time. But there! I shouldn't say such things. She certainly is of use to Louis."

"Of use! Why, Caroline dear, he positively couldn't do without her!"

At this juncture the two men emerged from the smoking room, where they had been enjoying an after-dinner pipe. Alfred was as solemn and portentous as ever, but it was plain to see that he hastened with some relief to join the womenkind; for there was always an uneasy consciousness in his mind that Louis did not share the exalted opinion of his attainments which was common to both wife and mother.

Later in the evening, Mrs. Alfred found an opportunity to open fire upon Louis on a subject that was occupying her mind. Alfred and his mother sat down to a game of "Canfield," from which Mrs. Alfred begged to be excused; and the Doctor, as they all knew, never touched

a card. It was not without design that the younger woman got out of earshot of the card-players, and also at such a distance that her host must necessarily join her. This he did, bringing over a book of illustrations to break the awkwardness of the tête-à-tête. She turned over the leaves with such expressions of admiration as the circumstances seemed to warrant, until suddenly she said, her eyes still upon the open page:

"Have you noticed any change in Sebastian of late?"

"What sort of a change?" asked Louis, putting himself at once upon the defensive.

"It is not easy to define," said Mrs. Alfred; "but it certainly is there."

"If there is a change," observed Louis, "no doubt it comes from some pathological cause. His health must have suffered from shock, from the additional responsibility laid upon him, or from too close attention to business."

"Pardon me!" said Mrs. Alfred. "But in my humble opinion—and you know how seldom I decide anything without Alfred—the change does not come from any such cause."

"If from no such cause, what then?" demanded Louis, with some sternness.

"I don't know. It seems mysterious."

Louis shrugged his shoulders.

"We medical men," he said, "can solve many mysteries,—impaired digestion, nervous strain, and so forth."

"I suppose I am imaginative," rejoined Mrs. Alfred, in a tone that was plainly incredulous. "One is apt to be so when one is over-anxious."

"There is no need for anxiety," declared Louis, somewhat curtly.

"To me there is *great* need," Mrs. Alfred said, with dignity, "apart altogether from our dear boy himself."

Louis smiled,—a smile which to Mrs. Alfred was provocative.

"So much," she went on, "is at stake for us all,—for my husband and children; I do not speak for myself. And, with all due deference to the dead, affairs have been so arranged that we are left dependent on that one person."

Her eyes flashed, her breath came short. Louis reflected that she had thrown off the mask with a vengeance.

"My father," he said, "who was an experienced man of affairs, had the same confidence in my brother's capabilities that I have."

"You have," cried the sister-in-law, "because you have no responsibilities, no marital ties! Your profession is sufficient for you in every way. You do not care."

Louis, leaning back in his chair, regarded her with an ironical expression.

"You credit me," he remarked, "with a surprising indifference to the goods of this world."

"An indifference which is natural under the circumstances," said Mrs. Alfred.

"An indifference which does not exist," retorted Louis, with some heat. "There is not a movement in the mercantile world, and especially in that branch of trade which concerns Wilmot & Co., that I do not follow. Yet I know with absolute certainty that Sebastian is the right man in the right place."

Mrs. Alfred looked down at the open book before her, with a smile that seemed to emit venom as a glowworm sends forth light.

"Even if your opinion,—from which some others differ—be correct, what if Sebastian should break down?"

"That eventuality would then have to be faced," said Louis. "As it is, all he needs is rest, which I have advised him to take. And, even in the case of a protracted absence, he has reduced that immense concern to an automaton-like perfection, that would enable it to go for a time of itself."

"And if Sebastian has done so much, may I ask how our dear father was engaged during all those years?"

"He was engaged in laying the foundations of an edifice which Sebastian developed and perfected as my father could not have done."

"I am sorry to hear you speak in that disparaging way of poor, dear Mr. Wilmot!" cried Mrs. Alfred.

This momentary return to her habitual

manner so exasperated Louis that he had difficulty in preserving his self-control.

"Discussion of this subject," he said, "is not only useless, but has become, by iteration monotonous and uninteresting."

"To you."

"Discussion is always uninteresting to me," agreed Louis.

"Perhaps," said Mrs. Alfred, with a concentrated spitefulness that was a revelation even to Louis, who disliked her, "our dear Sebastian may have other preoccupations of greater interest than the business."

"Very possibly," he assented.

"As, for instance, this!"

She held up a slip of paper that was worn and soiled. Upon it, in a scrawling and plainly illiterate hand, were inscribed the words:

"From Elmira, with a great deal of love."

Louis glanced at it, his face flushing crimson.

"Where did you get that?" he asked.

"It was picked up," replied Mrs. Alfred, sweetly, "by—by some one where Sebastian dropped it from his pocket."

She refrained from telling this stern censor that she herself had picked it up on that memorable night when Sebastian had emerged from the study after reading his father's confession. That particular slip of paper must have adhered to his clothing, and so have been dropped inadvertently, in his confusion at so inopportunately confronting his sister-in-law. She

had seized upon it and retained it; but she was now anxious to give the impression that it had been found by a servant and transmitted to her.

"When it reached me," she said, "I wanted to return it to our dear boy; but I hesitated about doing so. I thought, too, of burning it. Finally I threw it into a drawer, where it remained till just this very day. Finding it again, it occurred to me that I would consult you before destroying it."

"But," answered Louis, who was literally trembling with indignation, "why should it be of the slightest consequence what is done with it? The proper thing, of course, would have been to return it to Sebastian. But since that was not done, there is an end to the matter."

"I am so glad to hear you say that," remarked Mrs. Alfred. "I fancied, somehow, that it might be of importance."

"Of what importance could it possibly be?" asked Louis. "And why should we fancy anything about my brother's private affairs?"

"Now, now," said Mrs. Alfred, rising, "you are getting vexed with me, and that will never do. I will leave the piece of paper in your hands, to return it or destroy it, as you wish."

Louis' first impulse was to tear it into bits; but a moment's reflection, somehow, made him feel that it might be better to retain it,

and to take some opportunity of restoring it to his brother.

Mrs. Alfred, still standing, and with her most deprecating air, inquired:

"Now, please don't get angry with me for saying so, but don't you think this may have some bearing on the change in Sebastian?"

"I don't permit myself to think of what doesn't concern me," said Louis, brusquely; "and Sebastian is perfectly capable of managing his own affairs."

Happily for the peace of the evening, the game of "Canfield" came to an end, and Mrs. Wilmot approached.

"I want to ask Rosanna," she said, "for the recipe for that chicken pie she gave us at dinner. It was perfectly delicious. And such vegetables!"

"She grows a good many of them herself of late," said Louis; "and, in consequence, has almost turned me into a vegetarian."

He was wondering as he spoke, at the triviality of these remarks, following upon that suggestion which, as a burning brand, Mrs. Alfred had thrown into the placid depths of his confidence in Sebastian and his appreciation of his sterling qualities. It struck him as a sinister coincidence that twice upon that same day he had heard—once from the voice of love, and then from that of hate—items concerning Sebastian which troubled him. He walked home with his mother, since Alfred

and his wife lived at the other side of town; and she talked to him of the sale of the house, and of Sebastian's persistent refusal to entertain that idea. And for the first time Louis was less definite in his support of the latter; for the iron had entered thus far into his soul that he felt a new fear, bordering on distrust, of his younger brother.

XI.

THE determination to avoid or to put any person out of one's thoughts often results in more frequent meetings and more constant reminders. And so it proved with Sebastian. For not only did he encounter Dorothy Kent on a variety of occasions, but since she and Margie had become fast friends he was continually hearing her praises sung or her merits discussed; so that the interest, which might have died away under the pressure of various and important affairs, was kept alive and intensified by the very obstacles that seemed to forbid a closer acquaintance.

Once, and only once, he had spoken to her; and that was upon Fifth Avenue, in the midst of a crowd. It was his custom occasionally, after business hours, for the mere sake of exercise, to stroll up the great thoroughfare as far as Central Park, his absent gaze wandering over the throng of well-dressed people, or the continual stream of motor cars and other equipages that seemed to image forth the restless, swift striving of the modern multitude. Many were the nods and smiles of effusive greeting given to the wealthy young magnate of commerce, who thus indifferently strolled

on, with the air of one whose thoughts were far, indeed, from the passing scene. He returned these salutations with a cordial courtesy that had made him many friends, but without a gleam of interest, until all at once a face shone out among the multitude, and a dainty figure appeared directly in his path. If it had been an apparition from Fairyland he could not have been more startled, as he hastily raised his hand to his hat, and stammered a syllable or two in response to the softly spoken greeting. For that voice possessed—or did he merely imagine it?—a peculiar quality to thrill and to charm. He could scarcely remember afterward what it was that he said next, or in what form of words the girl answered. They were few in number, and he was left standing as Dorothy passed on and mingled with the throng.

He fancied, from her sudden appearance, that she had come out of the cathedral, near which he was now standing; and, by a sudden impulse, he turned and passed through the portals, that were thrown wide open, as if in invitation to the passing multitude,—an invitation sore needed by those hurrying throngs, upon whom the burden and the stress of modern conditions were pressing, in one way or another, with crushing force. Sebastian remembered how he had sometimes gone with Margie when she made her daily visit to the church, and he told himself that it was a good and commend-

able practice, as, having made his genuflection he sat and stared from the marble altar to the richly painted windows; and over him stole that sense of solitude, of rest and peace, inseparable from those vast structures, whose reason for existence is the worship of the living God.

Young Wilmot had by no means lost his faith; for his staying away from church was a series of deliberate acts. It was part of the great fear that enshrouded him like some noisome mist, and made him always dread lest any weakness on his part should force him to divulge his awful secret. His mind and his conscience were always turning themselves inside out, and debating whether or not he was bound to tell his brothers, and to have their co-operation in his efforts to find the mysteriously vanished Elmira (who must now be well advanced in age) and her daughter. It tormented him with the belief that he and the rest had no right at all to that inheritance which was his father's. In truth, his mind and imagination had evolved from the main fact one after another of those vain chimeras of the brain that made it impossible for him to judge clearly. And in that unbalanced condition of his mental equipoise, he regarded Church and religion as the force which might compel him to do things that would have unpleasant consequences. What if it might even be decided that he was morally bound to tell his mother and Margie?

Of late, too, he had found himself more and more isolated. Margie had been away from home, visiting that very Mrs. Rollins to whom Miss Kent was acting as companion. The lady had taken the two girls with her upon a trip. Louis, as Sebastian fancied, had been more reserved in manner, had eyed him with a certain scrutiny, and had avoided anything like confidential communication; while all the time the storm had raged concerning the sale of the house. He had had more than one scene with his mother, who had finally told him that, unless he could give her some good reason, she would insist on the house being sold. Now, although he was aware that she was legally unable to do so, the results of the threat were strained relations between them. And to the misery resulting from the thought that his mother regarded him as an enemy was added the minor torment of more and more frequent visits at the office from Alfred, gloomy and suspicious. In the sense of peace and well-being that stole over him as he lingered in the majestic calm of that vast edifice, glorified in the afternoon sunshine, the harassed soul of Sebastian became dimly aware that this influence, upon which he had been turning his back, might be precisely that which would give him strength to bear his trials, and to comport himself with the fortitude that he feared would shortly forsake him.

And this psychological effect upon him was

none the less marked that he had entered the church simply because it was connected with the one image of brightness that shone out from the surrounding gloom. In fact, that very gloom and his isolation threw into strong relief the personality that had impressed his imagination in Mrs. Rollins' drawing-room. All his thoughts of the girl who had then come into his life were genial, wholesome, natural; and he was disposed even to magnify her attractions, and to long for the closer acquaintance which prudence forbade. After that chance meeting on the Avenue and the half hour that had followed in the cathedral, his interest in her received a powerful impetus.

With the return of Margie to the house came a period of comparative calm to Sebastian; for his sister had been so struck with the change in his appearance, and the evident marks of the strain which he had undergone, that she imparted something of her alarm to her mother. The latter had consequently relented in her attitude of coldness to her younger son, and had even spoken to him with something of the old warmth and affection. Moreover, Margie, being full of the subject, necessarily spoke of Dorothy frequently and in the most glowing terms. Sebastian, though aware that it was a weakness, indulged himself so far as to listen with avidity, and to concentrate about that one object all the poetry and romance in which

his nature abounded. In the plain, everyday course of an ordinary love affair, Dorothy might never have obtained so strong a hold upon him, nor so deeply stirred his entire personality, as now, when Destiny rose up to forbid further intimacy, and to relegate any matrimonial designs to the region of the impossible.

It sometimes happened that Dorothy, returning with Margie from some social or shopping expedition, met Sebastian at the door; or, taking tea in Margie's boudoir, she encountered her friend's brother on the stairs. At such times she saw in him only an air of almost startled avoidance, that she felt to be unflattering, though it piqued her curiosity. For, without undue vanity, Miss Kent was well aware that the men whom she had met during her social career were not, as a rule, anxious to avoid her.

This resolute avoidance of her friend on Sebastian's part was not a little puzzling to Margie, and especially since she remembered his expressions of admiration of Dorothy Kent after their first meeting at Mrs. Rollins'. She could ascribe it in her own mind only to that increased absorption in business which had seemed to make Sebastian so unlike his former self. Upon one occasion the subject was broached between the two girls.

"Your brother has not much time for society," Dorothy observed,—adding with a

little laugh, "nor inclination for it either, I should judge."

She had just seen his retreating figure disappear hastily upstairs after he had saluted her in the hall. She could not know, of course, that he was revelling in the glimpse he had caught of her, and had taken up his station at the window of his own room that he might see her when she passed out. More than that, it had been his special study of late to leave the office earlier, on the bare chance of meeting her. His thoughts would no doubt have astonished her, though feminine instinct is very quick in such matters; and possibly she was aware that more interest might coincide sometimes with cold avoidance than with gay and easy familiarity. But, whatever might have been Dorothy's sentiments, great would have been the astonishment of those potentates of Commerce, with whom Sebastian had been that day conferring, could they have seen him thus waiting upon Opportunity.

Sebastian, secure in the solitude of his own room, smiled in his introspective fashion as he realized how much more absorbing were these thoughts than the consideration of trusts and anti-trusts, of mergers, with their advantages and disadvantages, in which had been spent the whole of that lovely day. It was true that the greater number of those ponderous citizens had passed, each in his day and generation, through some such experience; and,

having got it over, as one might get over the measles, had settled down for evermore to the consideration of commercial or financial problems. But not one of them, Sebastian was convinced, had ever lived through so beautiful a dream, ethereal and yet full of fire, where spirit and matter seemed to join, and where all of imagination and of romance that had survived the prose of commerce was stirred into active life. And Sebastian was well aware that it required only the force of personal association to turn this dream into a waking reality, an infatuation that would forever destroy his peace of mind.

Upon that very day, therefore, when Dorothy sat below and discussed him with Margie, he was urging upon himself the necessity of striving to avoid either the sight of her or the mention of her name, if he would not add to his other troubles this still more disturbing element.

Dorothy, on her part, felt a certain interest in that young man, whom his sister idolized, whom so many people had treated with deference on the evening of their first meeting; whom Mrs. Rollins considered the most eligible young man of her acquaintance; and whom Dorothy herself had found, during their brief interview, to be a good deal out of the common. She would have liked, in fact, to pursue the acquaintance, were it only to solve the problem of his personality. When she had made the

observation concerning him already recorded, Margie had answered slowly, as though she were thinking the matter out:

"Oh, Sebastian really likes society! I am quite sure, if he were not so busy, he would be a good deal of a ladies' man. I have heard him express the greatest admiration for beauty."

"You mean," said Dorothy, "that he talks over the girls he has met?"

"Whether he has met them or not," responded Margie, "I have often heard him admire their appearance."

Dorothy was silent, considering; while Margie in a burst of confidence, added:

"I am going to tell you how much he admired *you* that evening at Mrs. Rollins'."

Dorothy, who had few concealments about her, could not help showing her satisfaction.

"I don't know about the admiration," she answered, "but we seemed to get on rather well together."

"You certainly made an impression," said Margie; "and that is why I am so surprised—"

Margie did not finish the sentence, but Dorothy said quite calmly:

"You are surprised that he has so carefully kept out of my way ever since. But that is nothing uncommon. The conventional admiration that a man may express for a girl after a first meeting is nothing."

"I may be wrong," said Margie, "but it

seemed to me that it was something more than common with Sebastian."

There was a pause, after which Dorothy said frankly:

"If that were true, Margie—but of course even a sister is no judge,—I should feel almost more pleased and flattered than I have ever been; because your brother is not at all like the ordinary, conventional young man."

"No, indeed, he is not!" exclaimed Margie, her face flushing with pleasure. "Sebastian is so different! Oh, I can't express it, but he is splendid!"

"Even his name recommended him," said Dorothy. "Sebastian the saint was one of my favorite heroes when I was a child. And I don't think we ever lose our first impressions. Did you ever see a picture of him, Margie, in his splendid armor of the Imperial Legion, and then a martyr, stuck all over with arrows?"

"I never did," replied Margie. "I never knew much about the saints at all, except those with which Rosanna is familiar. But one might be stuck with arrows in real life, and it would be just as heroic to bear that bravely."

"Of course it would!" agreed Dorothy; but she wondered at the observation.

"Now, for instance," went on Margie, "when I get cross and peevish, and am downright rude and hateful to people who annoy me, and Louis strikes back, Sebastian, who has so

many worries, never loses his temper, but just goes quietly out of the room."

"He has no temper, then?" inquired Dorothy.

"Oh, yes! A few times I have seen him really angry. But he has his temper under perfect control."

"That is something fine," said Dorothy. "I would rather be able to do that than anything else."

"But I shouldn't think *you* would have much of a temper," remarked Margie.

"Oh, haven't I?" cried Dorothy. "Just ask them at home about my real Southern *rages!*"

"I don't get so much into rages as into nasty, spiteful tempers," confessed Margie.

"I suppose nearly everyone does," said Dorothy; "though I did fancy you were exempt, with your angelic little face."

Margie laughed gleefully at that compliment.

"I used to have fights with Louis," she said; "and there is some one else—" (She stopped.) "I had better not say any more. It may be a great deal my own fault."

"And, anyway, it's always better to strike in open fight," answered Dorothy. "I don't believe in using the dagger behind backs."

Later Margie returned to the subject of her brother.

"Perhaps I should not have told you all that about Sebastian," she said.

"Why not?" inquired Dorothy. "Are you afraid I might nourish hopes?"

"No, no, not that!" exclaimed Margie, hastily. "But it might be better to let you find out everything for yourself."

"There is probably very little to find out," laughed Dorothy. "But what you have said can't do any harm. It gives me a pleasant feeling of complacency, and disposes me favorably toward your brother. It is like planting a seed which, on better acquaintance, might grow into a flower of good-fellowship between us. And if there is no further acquaintance, or if it proves disappointing, why, then that little flower can wither without injury to any one."

"But," said Margie, hesitatingly, "if it should be serious on Sebastian's part?"

"There are no very alarming indications of that, so far," replied Dorothy, with her merry, tinkling laugh.

"I am not so sure of that," said Margie, in a low tone; adding after a moment: "And you know Sebastian would be a very good match."

"As for that," said Dorothy, with an impatient little gesture, "most of the good matches I have met have been detestable."

"Sebastian is not detestable," objected Margie, gravely.

"No, I did not mean that. I meant that being a good match is not in itself an argument for—for anything."

"I suppose not," said Margie, reflectively; "though a good many girls nowadays—"

"Bend to what some call 'the exigencies of circumstances.' I may do it myself sometime. But not just yet,—O Margie, not just yet!"

There was real feeling in her voice, which made Margie like her all the better.

"The time comes," continued Dorothy, gravely, "when poor girls can not resist the temptation. And I wonder—oh, I wonder—if some of the unhappy marriages we see do not arise from that?"

"They might," agreed Margie; "it is so hard to judge!"

"When one is safe from temptation, like you, daughter of the haughty rich!" cried Dorothy, waving her hand in mock melodrama. "But I will say for myself that, so far, I have been tempted to do anything else in the world rather than that."

"Sebastian would be glad to hear it," said Margie.

"Would he?" asked Dorothy, a curious expression passing over her face. "It might diminish his chances with this poverty-stricken child of the South. But why do you think so?"

"He told me so," declared Margie.

"Told you so?" repeated Dorothy, sitting up very straight and looking at her friend.

"He said he did not believe you were the sort of girl to sell yourself."

"Oh," cried Dorothy, with a sudden rush of feeling. "I hope he is right! I hope I shall always feel as I do now. But sometimes,

Margie, it is so hard! You have no idea how hard it is."

Margie looked wistfully into the girl's face, but she scarcely knew what form of words would be best to meet that confidence.

"But in any case," continued Dorothy, "I am glad he thinks that of me,—glad from every point of view."

After that the two girls stitched away at some embroidery, in a silence that was full of thought.

"I feel rather like a traitor for having told you any of these things," said Margie at last. "Sebastian was speaking in confidence, and he doesn't confide in many people. He might be angry if he knew I had repeated his words."

"I don't think he would," said Dorothy, looking down reflectively at her hands. "He would be either quite indifferent or glad that I should know."

"He might prefer to tell you himself," observed Margie.

"Or keep the matter locked up in his own mind, as he seems to be doing," laughed Dorothy.

"Yes, he might have some reason for doing that," assented Margie, gravely.

"Now, you are making him into a mystery."

Margie, remembering what her brother had said in the Park, and how he had declared the impossibility of marrying any one, felt uncom-

fortably conscious that mysterious he had certainly been of late.

"However," Dorothy declared, "I think we have talked quite enough about your brother for one sitting. His ears must be burning. And you must promise not to tell him any of the things I have been saying."

"Why, on your own principle, what harm could it do?" asked Margie, mischievously. "It would be planting a seed, and so forth."

"Nonsense! It is quite different where a girl is concerned."

"But in reality you have said nothing."

"I have talked about him and let you talk, dear; and that in itself does not bear reporting."

"You make me feel more conscience-stricken than ever about Sebastian," said Margie. "But I promise you that I shall repeat nothing, unless I find out that it really is serious with Sebastian, and that he is getting discouraged."

"He will never get discouraged about anything, with that look in his eyes and the set of his chin. He is certain to get what he wants in the long run."

"Including you?" jested Margie.

"Oh, I have a great store of obstinacy myself," said Dorothy, "that would make me fly to the ends of the earth, if necessary."

"Sebastian, if your theory be correct, might fly there, too."

"Ah, well, there is plenty of time to consider all that! And the ends of the earth are

very far away. And—who knows how anything will turn out?”

She rose and adjusted her dainty walking hat and put on her gloves, preparatory to departure; while Margie, watching her, thought within herself:

“Since Sebastian will probably marry sometime, and I shall have to make up my mind to that great wrench, I would rather it were Dorothy than any one else,—especially when I think what Alfred has gone and done, and how detestable a sister-in-law can be.”

Sebastian also saw, from his window, the departing visitor, and admired the perfect poise, the graceful and easy movement, that had come from a life spent much in the open air. He could not guess, of course, the thoughts which she carried away with her into that sunset atmosphere,—the clear, luminous haze that was settling over the two rivers, and surrounding the city with that mystic band of light, wondrous, beautiful as the spiritual and the supernatural that surrounds this workaday existence of toil and trouble and feverish unrest and unsatisfied desires.

The heart of Dorothy Kent rejoiced in that radiance, as it likewise did in what Margie had told her. It gave her a subtle sense of pleasure, of triumph, perhaps of satisfaction, that this Sebastian, who had interested her much more than the average young man, should not, after all, have been wholly indifferent.

XII.

SEBASTIAN hesitated for some time as to whether or not he should go to that dinner party which Mrs. Rollins was giving, possibly with the thought in her mind of promoting a project which had occurred to her. And this was no other than a better acquaintance between the head of the Wilmot firm and that young companion whom, in her childlessness, she regarded as a daughter. Nothing, in fact, would have given her greater pleasure than to secure for Dorothy Kent, whom she loved both for her own sake and that of her family, so advantageous a matrimonial alliance. Her keen eyes had seen, and her quick ears had told her from the inflections in Sebastian's voice, that he admired Dorothy. That was a common enough circumstance. Many men admired the girl. But the question she asked herself was, whether that sentiment would be likely to develop into something that was warmer and more personal. Of course, as she decided, no better means could be devised for promoting that scheme, than to bring them together. It is true, she had been disappointed that Sebastian had not even come to call upon her

protégée, nor showed any sign that he was aware of her existence.

When the invitation came for Sebastian—a tiny little note, which he suspected might be in Dorothy's handwriting,—he was several times upon the point of refusing. He told himself that elementary prudence forbade him, under the circumstances, to carry his acquaintance with the girl any further; since he was all too sensible of the fascination she had exercised over him, and which the very thought of her continued to exercise. Closer intimacy might only intensify the troubles that were gathering so thickly about him, by involving him in a hopeless love affair.

In this instance, however, inclination finally won the victory over wisdom. He persuaded himself that he could not run the risk of offending Mrs. Rollins; that it would be discourteous to the girl herself to refuse the invitation. Accordingly, Sebastian wrote a note of acceptance; and, though with many misgivings, sat in his office, where he directed the affairs of Wilmot & Co. with an elation of spirit that caused more than one person to comment upon the improvement in his health. He was as one who had cast aside for the moment galling bonds that were constraining him, and was now rejoicing in the sense of freedom. No matter what might come or go, he was determined to enjoy that one evening in the society of the girl who had so powerfully attracted

him. He found himself, even in the midst of the most abstruse business calculations, wondering what she would say and how she would appear, and whether her manner would show any resentment at his avoidance, or simply the calm indifference of a stranger.

At table, he was not told off to take her in to dinner. He was given instead the wife of a millionaire who was one of his own business associates. But Dorothy was placed on the other side of him, as he discovered with a quick beating of the heart and an intense feeling of gratification, that told him how vain had been all the art that he had practised in keeping out of her way. In reality, that avoidance had had the result of intensifying what might have been, in ordinary circumstances, a merely passing fancy.

His manner toward Dorothy was merely quiet and subdued; and his talk, much less easy and unconstrained, as she was quick to perceive, than on their first meeting. With the perception that was almost a sixth sense in her, the girl intuitively felt that he was upon his guard. She made no attempt, however, to turn the conversation into anything like a personal vein, occupying herself for a great part of the time with a very ordinary and prosaic young man who had taken her in to dinner.

It was through some question asked by this individual that Sebastian, whose ears were

strained in her direction even while he conversed with his dinner partner, gained a new light upon Dorothy's antecedents, and a clue which afterward proved of the greatest value to himself.

"Yes, before coming to Mrs. Rollins," Dorothy said, "I was companion to a lady out in the West, whom I had never seen till I took up my abode in her house."

"You say it was in Colorado?" the young man inquired.

"Yes, just a few miles from Denver," said Dorothy, — "a wild, romantic spot, with mountains rising all around."

The young man, who, as it appeared, had spent some time in that region, at once launched upon his personal experiences. He and Dorothy compared notes as to scenery and impressions of people and places; while Sebastian, with a curious sense of irritation that this other should have this bond in common with Miss Kent, devoted himself with feverish assiduity to his neighbor.

Presently, during a lull in his own conversation, he heard Dorothy say:

"The lady to whom I had gone as companion was sufficiently eccentric to give a spice to life."

"Was she wealthy?" the young man asked:

"No: rather the reverse; though, of course, she had quite enough for two. She was unmarried, and about middle age, I should judge;

and she herself used to say that she was an incarnate mystery."

"That was interesting," observed the other.

"So much so as to be almost weird at times. I was younger then—only about seventeen,—and I used to be half afraid of her."

There the conversation branched off to something else, but the subject haunted Sebastian with singular persistency. Not only did his interest and curiosity centre about that mysterious personage to whom Dorothy Kent had acted as companion, but it also seemed to throw a new light of interest about the girl herself. For his imagination pictured her far off in that wild, romantic spot, the associate of a woman, who was, to say the least, eccentric and surrounded by a halo of mystery. That mystery in itself appealed to him, who had been so lately confronted with the great mystery of a life.

Therefore, the inward struggle between prudence and inclination had been short; and after dinner Sebastian found himself seated beside Dorothy, with a deliberate yielding to temptation. And it must be owned that Dorothy had seen him approaching her with a thrill of anticipatory pleasure, and possibly an intuitive perception that inclination had conquered some other force which had been keeping him away from her. There was a slight amusement in her eyes, too, when the young man, without conventional platitudes, pro-

ceeded directly to the subject which interested him, with a frank avowal that he had been more interested in her conversation than in that which he had been so industriously maintaining with his neighbor on the other side.

"I should like," he said, "to hear something of your life in the West, of which I heard you talking at dinner."

"My life there," replied Dorothy, "was singularly quiet and uneventful, though the place itself was lovely. The mountains, the deep canyons, the wonderful vegetation, the beautiful river near at hand—oh, there couldn't be anything more beautiful in the whole world!"

"So I have always heard," assented Sebastian. "I think we have the finest country in the world. I have never been so far West; but when I take the rest that my medical brother has prescribed, I think I shall go there."

"You would enjoy it," Dorothy assured him, "especially if you care at all about shooting or fishing."

"I'm not much of a shot," said Sebastian; "but I have had some luck with rod and line. But, do you know, apart from the country, which has always appealed to me, I heard you talking at dinner of an eccentric lady, who seemed to be decidedly interesting?"

"So you are curious, then?" inquired Dorothy, the smile deepening in her eyes, which Sebastian was thinking at the moment were distractingly lovely. It was on the tip of his

tongue to say, "Curious about anything that concerns you." But prudence had not entirely abandoned him, and he contented himself with admitting that he was curious on certain subjects, and that that particular one appeared interesting.

"It *was* interesting," said Dorothy. "The character of my employer—for you know I was companion to her—seemed to fit in well with the wild character of the country. It was full of inequalities. It had its heights and depths, and it was mysterious."

"She was not, I suppose, young?"

"No," said Dorothy; "though I rather wonder why you should assume that."

"You are nothing if not analytical," smiled Sebastian. "But I think I may have heard you say so. Besides, ladies who are young do not often take a very young lady for companion; and their characters, as a rule, have not all the attributes with which you have just credited your mysterious personage."

"You talk," said Dorothy, with some resentment, "as if you were old and wise, and as if young girls were shallow and commonplace, and without heights or depths."

"Scarcely a fair conclusion," returned Sebastian. "But I think we may admit that it is ordinarily age and experience, except in the case of some premature trials, which bring out all those qualities."

"I am not so sure of that," said Dorothy.

"I don't pretend to have a wide experience of life, but I think there are often in the stormy, passionate heart of a child heights and depths, and mysteries too, that her elders have never sounded."

"You are," said Sebastian, thoughtfully, "speaking of the exceptional, and I of the ordinary."

"I don't think any life or any character is just ordinary, if we only knew it in all its bearings. But here we are talking away like two old philosophers!" said Dorothy, frowning slightly.

For she felt, somehow, that at the rose carnival of youth, at which they were both assisting, there were more absorbing things than the consideration of abstruse problems. She would like to have heard Sebastian talk about himself, or perhaps still more, about herself. She had, in fact, an eager curiosity to know how this much-praised brother of her friend, this magnate of commerce, felt toward her.

"We have strayed away, too, from your mystery," remarked Sebastian.

"Oh," said Dorothy, "as you may have heard me say at the table, she used to describe herself as an incarnate mystery. I suspect she must have got that expression out of a novel, because it did not fit in with most of her talk. But let me see now what I can tell you about her!"

She paused with a little air of retrospection,

which gave Sebastian an opportunity to study the well-cut profile of that face which had an ever-growing charm for him.

"She was, I think, about forty years of age, perhaps more,—it is hard to judge of age. She had travelled a good deal upon this continent; and, though she was reticent about her antecedents, I gathered from some expressions she let drop that her mother had been perhaps an actress. She had no very extensive education, still she was a devourer of novels of the paper-cover class. And when she was not reading she used to sit sometimes silent and gloomy in a corner, and fix her eyes upon me till every nerve in my body quivered. I don't know why I was afraid of her at such times, as she was never violent nor even particularly ill-tempered, and she usually treated me with great civility. But I was afraid of her heavy, sombre eyes and the lowering expression of her face, that made me fancy she might be meditating some injury to me. Of course it was only because I was young and fanciful; but often in the night, when I heard her come out of her room and go stealing about the house, I used to tremble, and I always kept my door locked."

Sebastian was listening with absorbing interest, which no doubt had something to do with the personality of the narrator; and, moreover, by a curious train of reasoning, he remembered that one memorable night in his own experience when he had felt himself almost

confronted by an impalpable presence, so strongly had his sensitive organism been affected by a story of the past.

"Once," said Dorothy, "she remarked upon the fact that my door was locked; and that frightened me more than ever, for I knew she had been trying it. 'You child,' she said, 'you'll be burned in your bed, first thing you know, if you lock yourself up like that. And I might want you, besides. It is in the night and the darkness that I may have most need of a companion.' I remember that I murmured something, I scarcely knew what; and she came close to me, in a way she had, and said in her deep, solemn voice: 'If it's of me you're afraid, you needn't be. I won't hurt you.' I explained that I felt more secure with my door locked, and that I sometimes feared robbers might get in. Then she said: 'You child, to be afraid of robbers! Now, I'm not afraid of any one. But keep your door locked, if you've a mind to.'"

Here Dorothy paused, and drew a deep breath.

"Do you know," she went on, "I never could feel comfortable again in keeping my door locked? What she had said about wanting a companion in the night—I suppose she meant when her dark moods came upon her—made me feel that in shutting her out, I wasn't fulfilling my contract. So I left the door open, and after that I scarcely ever had a good

night's sleep. I was always expecting to see her standing beside my bed, and I wanted to be awake when that happened. At last she came. I woke from an uneasy dose, to find her standing at the foot of the bed. She was looking down at me with that look which frightened me even in the daytime. And she said: 'I'm a miserable old woman. My money is nearly gone. I'll never get any more, and then I'll starve. Do you hear, you child? I'll starve.' I didn't know what to answer, so I was silent. And then she began to get angry, and said: 'Why don't you speak? Why do you lie there and stare at me?'"

There Dorothy paused again; for she did not want to finish that sentence, and to repeat how the woman had said: "If I had had eyes like those, I might have married a rich man, as the girls do in stories." Passing over that part of her narrative, Dorothy continued:

"She came then and sat down close beside my bed. When I tried to sit up she forced me back. 'Lie there,' she said, 'and listen, if you have nothing to say.' So I lay upon my pillow, with my face turned toward her, gazing at her while she went on:

"'Ever since my mother died—and that's a good many years ago—I've been looking for something—something that I'll never find now, when I'm old and getting helpless.'

"'But what is it?' I said. 'Perhaps I could help you to find it.'

“‘No, you couldn’t!’ she cried. ‘What do you know about such things?’

“‘About what things?’ I asked; for by that time I wasn’t quite so much afraid of her.

“‘Hold your tongue!’ she said. ‘If I had found that, I would have been rich—as rich as a Jew, mother told me. But she would never help me, and that’s why I hate her, living or dead.’

“‘Hate your mother!’ I exclaimed. And then she again bade me to keep quiet.

“‘She wouldn’t tell me,’ she repeated; ‘and without her help I could never find it.’

“I was afraid to ask her what, and she went on wandering about it, while I was thinking of buried treasures and of some lost mine in the mountains of the gold-bearing State. Then she began to wring her hands, and to moan and sob, and stare at me with her heavy eyes, that gave me a feeling as if she were going to spring.”

“My God!” said Sebastian, intensely moved by the recital. “It was awful! To think of your being in such danger!”

His tone may have conveyed more than he intended; for Dorothy, with a slight heightening of color, turned her face a little more away.

“It *was* awful,” said Dorothy. “I was afraid she had gone mad, or might go mad at any moment. And remember there was no light in the room except a glimmer that came

in from the hall, and the moonlight, that made her face look ghastly."

"‘If I don't find it soon,—very soon,’ she said, ‘I'll be a pauper, and I'll have to go to an almshouse to die, and they'll bury me in the Potter's Field.’"

"I tried to say that surely she had enough to keep her away from those dreadful alternatives. But she put her hand over my mouth as if she would choke me, and exclaimed:

"‘What do you know about it? Your voice is like a babbling brook!’"

"Then she got quiet again, and I could hear nothing in that terrible silence but the stream rushing down the mountain, and the note of some night bird in the thick trees outside. I never in my life was so thankful as when the first white light began to come in at the window. I was afraid for a time that it was still the moonlight, and I was delighted when I could see objects in the room, and knew that it was really dawn. As soon as she saw the light she got up and went away; and I lay thinking how I should escape from the place, or how I could endure another night. At breakfast she asked my pardon for having disturbed me, and she ordered me to lock my door again. ‘Lock me out,’ she said; ‘that is the only way to do. And even if I knock, don't pay any attention.’"

"Why," cried Sebastian, with all the vehemence of a man in love who sees the beloved

object threatened by danger, "you should have left there the very next day!"

"That was almost impossible at the time," said Dorothy. "In the first place, I had no money, since my month's salary was not due for a week; in the second place, I was afraid to tell her that I meant to go, not knowing what effect it might have upon her, or what she might do; in the third place—" Dorothy began; but she ended with a laugh, saying: "It sounds too much like a catalogue or a fairy tale."

"But I should like to hear about the third place," replied Sebastian, in a tone that indicated he was fast throwing prudence to the winds.

"Oh," said Dorothy, "it was only that I had an odd sort of feeling I should stay in that sinking ship, and not leave it alone in that wild place, in helplessness and despair!"

"But was there no servant—no one at all?"

"There was a deaf old woman, who did some of the rough work, but who could not be, in any other way, of the least service to her mistress. I did not tell them at home of what was going on, and I stayed until, in a fit of restlessness, Miss Wallace left that place for San Francisco. We were then in the centre of a crowded quarter of the city, and all my terror of her passed away."

At that moment Mrs. Rollins, who had been watching the progress of the affair with amused

and gratified interest, came over to tell Sebastian, that his brother Louis wanted him to call up the telephone of his office in about ten minutes. Mrs. Rollins, having given the message, took herself away again; and Sebastian said:

"Perhaps I shall have time to hear the rest of your singular lady's story."

"It will keep till we meet again," said Dorothy; "though there is not much more to tell."

Sebastian could not help rejoicing in the hope thus extended of meeting that charming narrator again and talking confidentially with her; while even prudence could be lulled to repose by the desire on his part to hear the sequel of a life history that so powerfully interested him. For he saw in the fate of this poor creature some analogy with his own. Both were seeking the thread of a labyrinth; but in her case the search was pursued without money or resources of any kind. Something in the chivalry of Sebastian's nature made him anxious to befriend or assist in some way that forlorn member of the human brotherhood, whose singularities were forgotten in the appeal she made to his heart.

"I heard Mrs. Rollins say," remarked Dorothy, "that it was your brother, Dr. Wilmot, who wanted you at the phone. Do you know I have met him more than once since I saw you last? The first time was at a reception,

and the second was when he came to call at Mrs. Rollins'."

Somehow, this intelligence smote upon Sebastian with the force of a blow. What if Louis, strong, masterful, likely to get what he wanted, sympathetic, too, when he chose, should, in his ignorance, press straightforward to that goal toward which he himself, with his fatal knowledge, dared not advance! There was keenest anguish in the thought. Louis putting forth all his powers to win this girl, who, if won, might have to be told that which might dash all her hopes to the ground! And what hopes might she not build, apart from love altogether, upon the excellent prospects of this skilful and popular physician, who was certain to attain eminence in his profession, in addition to the wealth he had inherited from his father! Surely here would be a tangle of successive and complicated miseries for all concerned! And for himself, in those few moments he knew, past all peradventure, that were Dorothy to fix her affections upon another, whether successfully or unsuccessfully, it would mean an intolerable, unendurable wretchedness to which he could not look forward with anything like equanimity. He knew, in fact, that he had added to his other torments that of an apparently hopeless infatuation.

There was nothing that he would not have given at that moment to be able to go forward and win, if that were possible, what then seemed

to be the one desirable object. The temptation came strong upon him—almost too strong to be resisted—to tell the girl all, and to say to her: “Do these things matter? Does anything matter except what you are to me and what I may become to you?” But then there uprose before his mind the solemn promise that he had given—only to himself and to the dead, it was true—that he would keep silence. He remembered the appeal that had seemed to issue from his father’s dead lips, pleading for indulgence, and that, despite his offences, he might be permitted to retain the love and regard of those who had been the chief factors in his later life.

When Dorothy, surprised at her companion’s silence, glanced at him, she saw that he was pale, with great beads of perspiration standing upon his forehead. In his eyes was a look that one might wear who had in sight a forlorn hope which he was preparing to lead. It was a look that appealed to Dorothy more than any language could have done, and for the first time caused her heart to beat with an emotion that was not merely interest nor gratified vanity. That look meant, as a sudden intuition told her, something that bordered on the heroic. It raised this wealthy young man above the commonplace and put him upon a plane where she, at her best, might reach him. If intuition is a subtle thing, it is also an extremely powerful thing; and, although not a word

had been spoken, the acquaintance, the understanding between those two progressed more than it might have done in years. That weary, strained expression, that sudden silence, the forced smile upon the lips, and the look which she had read aright, and which said, "Come what may, I shall be faithful," stirred Dorothy to the very depths of her nature. Though of course she could not have formed the remotest conjecture as to the reason for that look, she realized how much more intense may be one's own power of believing or hoping or loving, or those of any one near at hand, than the ordinary circumstances of life permit one to suppose. It was with an effort that she found herself saying, in what sounded like her usual tone:

"I like your brother immensely. He has a strong, clever face, and he is so bright and unusual."

"He is very fortunate," said Sebastian, in a tone that to himself sounded stiff and unnatural, "in having won your good opinion. There are some men who would do anything to gain it."

"Well," observed Dorothy, trying to speak lightly, "I sincerely hope that you are amongst them."

"You know that I am amongst them," replied Sebastian, gravely. "There can be no doubt in your mind upon that subject."

She raised her eyes to his for a brief moment.

More luminously than ever the lamp was shining behind them. It seemed to light the dark places of Sebastian's soul and to give him fresh hope and courage.

"Now," she said, "had you not better go and take your brother's message? It might be something important."

"Possibly," rejoined Sebastian, feeling as if there could be nothing of the smallest importance except Dorothy and whatsoever concerned her. He rose, however, and took his way to the phone. When he had got Louis' number, the latter said to him:

"I hope I haven't disturbed you in anything interesting, but I just wanted to know if you can go to a concert to-morrow night. I have asked Mrs. Rollins and her guest, Miss Kent, whom, of course, you have met. She is very charming; and, as you are a squire of dames, perhaps you will help me out in this affair."

Sebastian, who was disturbed by a variety of emotions, in which were blended a jealous resentment and delight at the prospect of again seeing Dorothy, accepted the invitation with almost involuntary eagerness. Louis, having obtained his promise, dismissed the matter with his customary abruptness, and turned to another subject:

"I want to have a talk with you, too, about Margie. Perhaps she has told you. I know a fellow who is ambitious of becoming our brother-in-law."

"All right! I'll see you to-morrow night," Sebastian answered, mechanically.

He hung up the receiver, and stood for a moment dumfounded. Margie, too! There was sadness in the thought, since hitherto she had been all his own. And, moreover, here was another complexity. It reminded him how the Fates in the old classical dramas used to wind their meshes about some human life, and follow one catastrophe by another until a tragic climax was reached. Should he have to break Margie's heart, supposing that this aspirant for her hand had found favor with her, under the same cruel weight that should break his own? The slight resentment that at another time he might have experienced, that Louis had been the first to be informed, now scarcely made itself felt in the deeper issues at stake. His silence was to be as a wall, dividing him from all he loved,—a wall that, crumbling and falling, might ultimately destroy the structure of their happiness.

XIII.

IT was a curious coincidence that just when Sebastian had abandoned his attitude of prudence to the extent of accepting an invitation to Mrs. Rollins', of conversing confidentially with Dorothy, and of promising to make one of Louis' party, another influence was being exerted upon the affair,—an influence which was sufficiently powerful to change Mrs. Rollins' whole attitude toward Sebastian, at least in so far as Dorothy was concerned.

On the very afternoon following the dinner, she had received a visit from Mrs. Alfred, whom, apart from the friendship between the families, she had known intimately at school; so that each was in a position to speak freely to the other. Mrs. Alfred had brought over a piece of embroidery as a pretext for a confidential chat. Her few preliminary observations were upon dress, upon a book she had been reading—for she prided herself in keeping up with current literature,—and upon some gossip relating to one or other of their acquaintances. But all the time she was watching her opportunity to attain the object which had brought her thither, and to burst forth upon Sebastian, who had been, indeed, the predominating theme of his

sister-in-law's thoughts for some time. She had never felt very cordially disposed toward the young man, who occupied so commanding a position in the family to the detriment, as she believed, of his elder brothers. Her own faculty of perception, which was highly developed, informed her that Sebastian was in reality of finer mould, of a higher order of intellect than even the clever Louis; and of a force of character that made him practically unassailable.

This consciousness of superiority to his brother had always irritated her; but it had reached a species of climax when Sebastian, in addition to the headship of the firm, had been charged with the conduct of the estate, his brothers acting merely in an advisory capacity. She had been intuitively aware also of Sebastian's mental attitude toward Alfred, whom he had never disparaged by a word. So that she had grown to feel something like hatred against her younger brother-in-law,—if "hatred" be not too dignified a term for jealous irritation, suspicion, prejudice, that amounted to monomania.

"I believe," she said, "my brother-in-law Sebastian was dining with you yesterday evening."

"Yes. My dear Sebastian!" cried Mrs. Rollins, enthusiastically. "I love him as if he were my own brother—or should I say son?"

Mrs. Alfred looked smilingly into her friend's face as she spoke thus, and said:

"You *do* like him?"

"I have just told you that I *love* him," declared Mrs. Rollins. "He is the best, the kindest! Even his faults are those that one can admire."

Mrs. Alfred was still smiling, her eyes narrowing into slits, and her face transformed into a mass of wrinkles.

But her friend stopped suddenly and looked at her.

"You're fond of him too, Caroline?" she asked.

"The dear boy! I suppose I really am, in spite of everything."

"'In spite of everything'?" echoed Mrs. Rollins.

"Oh, yes! I suppose I should be as enthusiastic as anybody else, but I have been endowed with such a fatal gift of perception! It really is a curse. It acts like a microscope, and makes me see all kinds of flaws where others see pure crystal."

"Perhaps you look at too close range, as family critics are apt to do," said Mrs. Rollins. "But certainly you surprise me."

"At first I was surprised myself," replied Mrs. Alfred. "But, really, since his father's death I have been sadly disappointed in Sebastian."

"In what way?" inquired Mrs. Rollins, gravely.

"In every way, Mabel. He has opposed his

mother in almost everything she wants to do. He has assumed such a high-handed manner about everything! He wants to keep the business in his own hands and to push his brothers aside. Louis doesn't care, he is so taken up with his profession; but Alfred feels it keenly. Sebastian is almost insolent to him when he takes the trouble of going down to the office, which he feels obliged to do every day; for he knows very well that otherwise things would go to the dogs. A man so young as Sebastian could never manage such a concern. He is no more capable of keeping it going than I am."

Emotion overcame her, and she stopped abruptly. Here was a revelation of the tempest that was raging in the Wilmot connection, where all had seemed so serene. Up to this point, Mrs. Rollins' sympathy had been largely on the side of her favorite; for, being a shrewd and capable woman, she was inclined to think that there was a clear case of jealousy, which in families, as elsewhere, so often makes the various members insensible to merit or to excellence of character.

But Mrs. Alfred, seeing that she did not prevail, and carried away by the force of her own feelings, went further than she had intended; for it is a melancholy truth that many a reputation is bartered away for no more solid reason than the heat of an argument. Never before since her marriage had Mrs.

Alfred thrown off her smiling mask in presence even of so intimate a friend as Mrs. Rollins. The latter, watching her, remembered how as a schoolgirl, on two or three occasions, this Caroline had suddenly displayed paroxysms of spiteful fury.

"I am going to speak plainly now," she said; "and you must believe, Mabel, that I should never have done it only for something that I heard, quite by chance, on the street this morning."

"What was that?" Mrs. Rollins inquired dryly.

"It was that Sebastian had paid marked attention yesterday evening to that charming little Miss Kent. *She is* such a dear!"

"Well," said Mrs. Rollins, in the same tone, "if that were the case, what then?"

"Ah, nothing at all!" replied Mrs. Alfred. "For there is not the slightest danger of such an affair going further on Sebastian's part. He is far too cautious and cold-blooded to permit himself to think matrimonially of a poor girl, and one without definite position."

"Dorothy Kent," said Mrs. Rollins, with considerable heat, "is my personal friend, and belongs to an excellent Southern family! Nor does she require in the least to sue for any man's favor."

"There, there!" cried Mrs. Alfred, in her softest and most conciliatory voice. "I might have known you would be annoyed with me, I

am such a blunderer. But, my dearest Mabel, if I have spoken so plainly—and you must let me speak more plainly still,—it is because, that under the circumstances, I feel it my duty to let you know.”

“Let me know *what*, Caroline? In heaven’s name, what is it you are driving at?”

“Sebastian,” said Mrs. Alfred, speaking deliberately and ignoring her friend’s impatient tone, “has been acting in the most extraordinary fashion since his father’s death. He is mysterious, secretive, starts if he is spoken to suddenly, and—but, before I go further, I really think I must swear you to secrecy, as we used to do at school.”

“If by that you mean that I am not to repeat to the family what you have said,” answered Mrs. Rollins, “you can depend upon my discretion. If in any other way I should see fit to make use of the knowledge you may impart to me, well, you must take the risk.”

Mrs. Alfred considered. She knew perfectly well that what Mrs. Rollins meant was that she should warn Dorothy Kent, if she thought the occasion demanded. And, since that was precisely what the mischief-maker was anxious that she should do, she tacitly agreed to the condition.

“I can rely on you to do what is right,” she said; “and so I shall speak out. For I can’t talk to his mother about Sebastian. Until lately he was faultless in her eyes. Margie is

fairly blinded by him; and Louis is so rude that I hold as little communication with him as possible. It is always difficult for people-in-law to speak out frankly; but, as you see, in my case the difficulties are increased tenfold."

"Well," observed Mrs. Rollins, "it is always hard for an outsider, no matter how intimate, to judge of any one; but I must say that I have always had the highest opinion of Sebastian."

"So has every one who does not know," returned Mrs. Alfred. "So had I when I first married into the family, and even for some time after. His father, no doubt, kept him in check; for it is only since his death that Sebastian has begun to show what, I fear, is his real character."

She paused; but, her listener remaining silent, presently pursued her narrative,—speaking rapidly now, and as if with a fear of being interrupted before she should have time to finish. Two red spots burned upon her cheeks, and her eyes fairly flashed fire, while her sibilant voice proceeded:

"He has given up his church, and you know what that means to a Catholic."

Mrs. Rollins looked concerned; for, though not a Catholic herself, her experience at the convent had given her some idea of how significant was such a circumstance.

"And I am afraid, to tell the truth," said Mrs. Alfred, "that Sebastian, cautious as he

is, has been betrayed into a secret marriage or some other low connection."

"I don't believe it!" cried Mrs. Rollins. "I will never believe any such thing about Sebastian."

"I was like you," rejoined Mrs. Alfred, lowering her eyes, "until a circumstance—I will admit it was nothing more than a slip of paper which Sebastian dropped from his pocket—made me fear the worst. I can't say more, and perhaps I have said too much," she added, rising and folding her work preparatory to departure. "But I wanted to put you on your guard."

"It was quite unnecessary," said Mrs. Rollins. "And I am heartily sorry to hear such things about Sebastian."

"Most of our idols have feet of clay," remarked Mrs. Alfred, adjusting her becoming little toque at the glass. "Human nature is disappointing."

She kissed her friend and went away homeward, mingling on Fifth Avenue with the stream of beauty and fashion, and restored to all her ordinary calmness and composure. That ebullition of spite had wonderfully relieved her. For, though the venom of envy and bitterness had been boiling and seething within her, she had not deemed it prudent to talk so freely even to Alfred. Any twinges of conscience that she might have felt in shaking Mrs. Rollins' faith in Sebastian, and possibly interfering with som

cherished plan of his own, were set at rest by her complacent reflection that if the accusation were true, she had saved the girl; if false, she had saved Sebastian from making a fool of himself with a penniless companion. Such an alliance would not do at all for the head of the house of Wilmot. It would reflect discredit on them all. But strongest of all within her was a feeling which, perhaps, she scarcely acknowledged to herself. This was the gratification of the instinctive cruelty of her nature, which made her rejoice in returning Sebastian evil for the imaginary injury he had done Alfred and herself.

Mrs. Rollins, left alone, indulged in no very agreeable reflections. Despite her confident assurance to Mrs. Alfred that her warning had been unnecessary, she was not so positive that harm had not been already done. She herself, too, had cherished golden visions for Dorothy, and had begun to feel quite elated by the prospect that those hopes might be realized. She had been greatly encouraged by the demeanor of Sebastian upon the previous evening. Therefore, she was not at all grateful to her whilom friend for the warning, and could not forgive her for having destroyed those bright castles in the air that had been occupying her mind all day. Nor could she as yet persuade herself that the accusation was altogether true. But she was determined that she would act upon it to the extent of cautioning Dorothy,

and of striving, if possible, to undo what had been imprudently done. She could not well break up the party that had been arranged for that evening; but she promised herself that it should be Louis, and not Sebastian who would act as escort to the girl, and that any further intimacy between the two should be resolutely checked.

When Dorothy came in that afternoon, more bright and cheerful even than usual, and full of her own pleasant thoughts, in which Sebastian Wilmot had a share, she was a good deal surprised to be invited by Mrs. Rollins to a conference. That lady's tone portended something—Dorothy scarcely knew what. The girl seated herself in silence, waiting, and hardly interrupting the pleasant anticipations of the evening that were filling her mind.

"My dear Dorothy," said Mrs. Rollins, "you are one of the most sensible girls I have ever met."

"Well," said Dorothy, with a grimace, "that is not always the highest compliment; but I suppose in this case I may accept it as such."

"You appear," went on the elder woman, "disposed to be friendly with Sebastian Wilmot?"

Dorothy was vexed when the telltale color flew to her face, and she asked herself impatiently why the sudden mention of that name should occasion such a result.

"I am sorry," continued Mrs. Rollins, without

waiting for any answer, "but I am afraid I can not permit of any further intimacy."

Dorothy was naturally astonished, being well aware of the long-standing friendship between the two families of Wilmot and Rollins. Nor had she been altogether oblivious of Mrs. Rollins' rather obvious desire to throw her into Sebastian's company. She had even heard her employer praise the young man inordinately.

"Why, what has this poor Mr. Sebastian Wilmot done?" she inquired, finding her voice again, and trying to speak lightly.

"From what I have lately heard," said Mrs. Rollins, "there appears to be some mystery about himself or his way of acting, which prevents him from being a desirable acquaintance for a girl."

"A mystery!" cried Dorothy. "Oh, how perfectly charming!"

"Its charm may not be of the stuff that is wholesome for girls," answered Mrs. Rollins, severely.

"But it lends him so much more interest," said Dorothy. "It takes away the crude flavor of the counting-house. You really should not have told me, if you wished to disenchant me."

There was a pause, broken at length by Dorothy, who said, still in the same half-laughing tone:

"And are we still going to the concert party to-night?"

"Of course," responded Mrs. Rollins, impatiently. "It could not be broken up."

"And must I be perfectly silent and not speak to this walking mystery?"

"Don't be absurd!" cried Mrs. Rollins. "You will act just the same as usual,—only there are many ways by which a girl can let a man know that she desires nothing further than the merest acquaintance with him."

"Oh, yes!" answered Dorothy. "I can easily let him or any one else know that."

"Very well, then. We need say nothing more upon the subject."

"But I think," said Dorothy, straightening up her little figure, while her mobile face was alive with some generous emotion,—“I think there is this much more to be said, so far as I am concerned: while I do not know Mr. Sebastian Wilmot very well, I refuse to believe anything seriously to his discredit.”

Mrs. Rollins smiled. She liked Dorothy none the less for this advocacy. It was just like the generous, loyal soul that she was. But the very fineness of her nature was another reason why she must be protected from whatever might mean future pain or injury of any sort. Above all, she must form no unfortunate attachment. And Mrs. Rollins, in reflecting upon the matter, had come more and more to the conclusion that affairs must be serious indeed when Mrs. Alfred had overstepped her habitual caution, and betrayed a family secret.

"You will do well," she said, "to take my advice. I have your welfare at heart, and I know the world as you could not possibly know it."

"I know enough," cried Dorothy, stoutly, "to feel sure that Sebastian Wilmot is all that is good and honorable."

"If that be so—and I sincerely wish I could still agree with you,—a little judicious reserve on your part can do no harm. Follow my advice for the present; and while you are under my control receive no visits from him, nor in any other way permit the acquaintanceship to grow into intimacy."

"May I tell him that this is your wish?" asked Dorothy.

"You have my full permission, if you think it necessary," was Mrs. Rollins' reply. But there was a slight coldness in her tone. She would have preferred that her young charge should accept her decision without demur.

To Dorothy, here was a new and startling condition of affairs, which bade fair to destroy in the most ruthless manner her anticipations—at least of an acquaintance that should be pleasant, to say nothing of certain other hopes that, in her sensitive pride and maidenliness, she would scarcely as yet admit to herself. She was filled with a burning indignation against some person or persons unknown, with whom she would like to have done battle. It was only on going into Mrs. Rollins' sitting-

room, where the guest of the afternoon had been conversing, that a new light dawned upon Dorothy. She noticed the lingering odor of a peculiarly powerful perfume which Mrs. Alfred had been using, and surmised that she had been there. She remembered the opinions which even the gentle Margie had expressed concerning her sister-in-law, and she said bitterly to herself: "The serpent has been here and has left its evil trail!"

But, since Mrs. Rollins had not thought proper to say anything about her informant, Dorothy imitated her reserve. It made her more determined, however, to allow no prejudice of any kind to take lodgement in her mind against Margie Wilmot's favorite brother. "I will obey Mrs. Rollins," she said, "of course, while I am under her care. But I shall frankly explain to Mr. Wilmot the reason why."

The party to the concert was so arranged that Sebastian sat beside Mrs. Rollins, and Dr. Louis was told off, as it were by the chaperone, to escort Dorothy. The two walked in front, on the way to the cars, and in the concert hall he was placed on one side of her and kept her engaged in talk. So that it was not until rather late, in a lull of the performance, that Sebastian at last found an opportunity for a brief conversation with Dorothy. By an almost involuntary impulse, he reverted to the subject which he had found so interesting.

"I wanted to ask you," he said, "if your

eccentric lady had always lived out West?"

Dorothy was surprised by the inquiry, but she answered quite readily:

"Oh, I think she was born somewhere in New England!"

"In New England?" repeated Sebastian, half startled; thinking that here again was a coincidence. "And did you ever solve her mystery?"

"Well," said Dorothy, "in one sense I did. She told me what it was she had been so long seeking. But in another sense I never did, since she had not solved it herself."

"That is to say, she had not discovered the object of her search?"

"Yes," replied Dorothy, "that is what I mean. And I think I ought to explain that I should not have been talking about her affairs at all, only that she hoped, and I agreed with her in hoping, that by giving them some publicity she might gain the object she had in view."

"In that case," said Sebastian, "there is no indiscretion in asking what it was she wanted to find out."

"No, there is no indiscretion," answered Dorothy; "in fact, I thought of asking your advice. For though I gave up my position with her, I am still interested and I promised her to help if I could."

"If I can be of the least assistance," said Sebastian, thinking of his own ill success in

a matter he had so closely at heart, "of course I shall be only too glad."

"Then I may begin by telling you that the object of her search was to find her father."

"To find her father?" echoed Sebastian, startled almost beyond self-control by this announcement, which he had not expected.

"Yes. Isn't it extraordinary?" said Dorothy. "You see, she had lived with her mother until the latter's death."

"So her mother is really dead, then?" remarked Sebastian.

Dorothy stared.

"Oh, yes, she has been dead a great many years! I think, as I told you last night, that the mother belonged to some theatrical company, and she used to take her daughter with her from town to town, far out in the West. At last some one left her a little money, and she abandoned the stage,—dying, however, soon afterward."

"But during all that time," inquired Sebastian, "where was the father?"

"That was something which either the mother did not know or she chose to keep to herself. You see, she had voluntarily left her husband, because as she said, they could not agree, and she had come to hate him. She must have been a strange, undisciplined sort of person; but I suppose she had never been taught any better. My employer believed that she had changed her name to avoid any

risk of discovery; and she never would play in the New England town where she had been married, nor in New York. Perhaps she suspected that her husband was there. She always spoke of him as 'that man,' or 'your father,' my employer said; and never mentioned his name. Isn't it a strange romance of real life?" Dorothy concluded.

"Yes, very strange," said Sebastian.

"Though I suppose," answered Dorothy, putting her head on one side, with her little ruminative air, "such things do often happen, especially in the great cities."

"Very probably they do," said Sebastian, his breath coming thick and short. The coincidence—if coincidence it were—was being pressed home too close. He sat staring straight in front of him with eyes that saw nothing.

"I felt so sorry for the poor soul," said Dorothy, "that, although my mother insisted upon my leaving her, one of my hopes in coming to Mrs. Rollins was that I might be able to help her. But in this big New York it is like looking for a needle in a haystack."

"It is worse even than that," said Sebastian, in a tone that caused Dorothy to turn and look at him. He was deadly pale, and his eyes had a strained look of terror or some other powerful emotion.

It was then that for the first time the thought flashed into the girl's mind of what she had momentarily forgotten—Mrs. Rollins' warning

and her hint that there might be a mystery in this young man's life. What else could have made him look like that? Then an expression of relief crossed her face, and she broke, without apparent reason, into a little tinkling laugh. Sebastian always thought it one of the prettiest things about her; and even in that moment it thrilled him with an acute sense of pleasure, surmounting all his pain. With that laugh, as with some wholesome touch of light on a dark place, came back Dorothy's generous belief that the man beside her could not be connected with anything discreditable. And such belief, proceeding from intuition, is, even in the most inexperienced, far more often right than the belief that is painfully worked out by reason.

"I should like," said Sebastian, speaking at last, "to help you in this matter. I have the deepest sympathy for that poor woman; and, besides, there is always something satisfactory in the solution of a mystery."

"Yes," answered Dorothy; "I feel that way, too. But it will be splendid if you are really willing to take an interest in the matter,—you have so many ways of helping at your command."

"I suppose I have," said Sebastian; "though I think these mysteries often come to light of themselves, apart from anything that any one can do. It is on the same principle as the old axiom that murder will out."

"Well, if you help it to come out," continued Dorothy, "you will be like those knight-errants of old, who took up the cause of ladies in distress; and then you will be ever so much obliging me."

It was on Sebastian's lips to say: "And I would do anything to oblige you." But he restrained himself by a mighty effort. That was the peril he felt in association with her,—this constant impulse to speak words which were better left unsaid; and to express sentiments that, uttered, would have given the greatest joy; but, repressed, hurt him cruelly.

"I should like," he said, in a quiet, even voice that gave no evidence of these conflicting emotions, "to have some information concerning this man,—some description, for instance, of his personal appearance."

"I can do better than that," replied Dorothy: "I can give you a photograph of him."

Sebastian's heart gave a leap. He felt himself growing cold and hot by turns.

"It was taken, of course, when the man was very young; and is, besides, faded a good deal by time. But still it would be a clue."

"Yes, indeed," said Sebastian, in a low voice, "it would certainly be a clue."

"I wanted Miss Wallace to put it into the hands of the police," Dorothy added; "but for some reason or other she would never consent to that. She found it only by accident,

hidden away amongst some rubbish in a trunk, long after her mother's death."

"But why," asked Sebastian, "didn't the mother employ the knowledge she possessed,—why didn't she try to find this man, and make him at least support the daughter?"

"But that," said Dorothy, "was exactly what she didn't want to do. That was why her daughter thought she changed her own name. Though she was a mere child at the time, she heard her mother say one day she would rather die than go back to him or take any of his money. And I can understand that feeling. Oh, almost any woman can understand it perfectly well!"

Sebastian smiled; for he knew how many women there were who would have promptly overruled such scruples with the hope of getting money.

"Well," said Sebastian, "you must let me see that photograph."

"I will give it to you," answered Dorothy, "if you will promise not to let it get into the hands of the police, at least until no other hope remains. In that case, I might get Miss Wallace's permission to let it be given to a detective."

Mrs. Rollins, who had been all this time entertaining Dr. Louis, and casting glances of uneasy reprehension at Dorothy, finally caught the latter's eye.

"Oh," said the girl suddenly to Sebastian, "I shall have to send you the photograph."

"No, no, don't do that by any means!" he answered quickly. "Please don't on any account send it to the house. I will come and get it."

"But you can't," said Dorothy; "for I must tell you—it is better to be frank—that Mrs. Rollins has asked me not to receive you there nor elsewhere."

Sebastian leaned back in his chair and stared at her.

"When, may I ask, was this warning given?"

"Just before dinner-time, this evening."

"And yet you are here?"

"She said that could not be avoided, as she had promised Dr. Louis. I can not understand it at all; for I thought you were such great friends."

"Our families have always been," replied the young man.

"And *you*, too!" cried Dorothy, warmly. "I often heard her sing your praises."

Sebastian looked thoughtful.

"It is something she has heard," said Dorothy.

It was on the tip of her tongue to tell him that Mrs. Alfred had been there that afternoon. She restrained herself, from a scruple about causing dissension in families.

"I am at a loss to think what it can be," said Sebastian, deliberately. "Would you mind if I were to ask her?"

"Not in the least," answered Dorothy. "It might be the wisest thing to do. But I am not sure that she will speak. I fancy she

is pledged to secrecy. She hinted at some mystery."

"There seem to be mysteries in the air," said Sebastian, with a forced smile.

But the mention of that word had determined him not to question Mrs. Rollins on the subject; for he was chilled by a sudden fear of what some one, possibly Mrs. Alfred, might, in some inexplorable fashion, have found out.

"At least," he said, "you have not been appalled by it?"

"I am not a very credulous mortal," rejoined Dorothy. "I am not a Southern for nothing. And you know one of our qualities is loyalty to a friend."

"Thank you!" said Sebastian. "Such a quality is an anchor to which even the shipwrecked may cling."

This seemed a singular expression, Dorothy could not help thinking, for a young man favored in every respect by fortune. But probably he was using it merely as a generality, with no particular application.

"I think," continued Sebastian, "that, after all, I shall not say anything to Mrs. Rollins, unless she speaks to me. But I shall make a formal dinner call at her house and ask permission for once to see you. That will be with a view to obtaining the photograph."

He was thinking that, in fact, whatever Mrs. Rollins' motive might be in thus suddenly changing her attitude toward him, she was

right, and that his visits to Dorothy, or his intimacy with her, had better come to an end.

At that moment Mrs. Rollins joined in the conversation, and made it general; and the next performers came hurrying onto the stage, the orchestra began to tune up, and Sebastian had no further opportunity to exchange a word with Dorothy. He had to walk home beside Mrs. Rollins, through the streets lighted to the brilliancy of day by the electric bulbs, which seemed to dim the far-off stars. And, as they walked, before him he saw, chatting and laughing, Dorothy with Louis. A strange sort of resignation seized upon Sebastian and seemed to steel him against all emotion. If Louis were preferred, at least by Mrs. Rollins, and ultimately perhaps by Dorothy, there seemed to be nothing that he could do save to accept that trial with all the rest that had come upon him.

Mrs. Rollins, on her part, felt constrained and awkward; though underneath her reserve with her late favorite there was a certain sympathy that struggled with the prejudice which had been excited. Had Dorothy been out of the question, she would have given but little heed to what had been said. It was solely her responsibility toward the girl that induced her to adopt a prohibitive attitude. As for Sebastian, though intensely conscious of her new demeanor toward him, he walked

by her side, keeping up the conversation by a few grave and quiet commonplaces until her house was reached.

XIV.

WHEN the concert was over and the ladies left at home, the two brothers pursued their way through the clear starlight, under the blue dome resplendent with constellations, burning that night with marvellous brilliancy. Louis had suggested that Sebastian should come home with him, to talk over the affair of Margie. Sebastian had agreed, though the idea filled him with perturbation. For what could he say, what explain? It seemed to him impossible that any of the family should marry, after the knowledge that had come to him at his father's death,—unless, indeed, the person desiring to contract such an alliance should be put into possession of all those details, with what result must be merely conjectural.

After the two had left Broadway, the route led chiefly through those side streets that, quite early in the evening, give the idea of being deserted; for the rows of brown stone houses, standing sombre and silent, despite a gayly lighted window here and there, giving glimpses of a sumptuously furnished interior, mostly throw dark shadows around them.

Louis noted his brother's taciturnity, which

was part of the singular change in him that everyone had been remarking. But it never occurred to Louis to try to solve the mystery. Questions were abhorrent to him, except when they were professionally necessary; and even then he often preferred to trust to his own powers of observation. And of all things in the world for which people feel grateful, there are times when reticence must rank first.

Louis opened his door with a latchkey, and, turning on the light in the hall, saw to his surprise that the dining-room was also lighted. Presently he heard a voice from there:

"Is that you, Mr. Louis?"

He answered by appearing at the door of the cheerful-looking room, wherein stood Rosanna, beaming at sight of the two brothers, and nodding genially.

"I thought mebbe Mr. Sebastian would be comin' home with you," she said.

"Thought-reading," replied Louis,—*"a clear case of telepathy!"*

"Such a tease as you are, Mr. Louis! But I made a cup of coffee the way Mr. Sebastian used to like it."

"Coffee!" exclaimed Louis. "Why, it's as much as my professional reputation is worth to let any one drink it at this hour."

"Barrin' it be yourself, that'll be none the worse for a cup of it. I just put it on a few minutes ago, in that newfangled machine you've got, that's fit to spoil it, to my thinkin'."

"Shades of Mrs. Alfred," said Louis, "who chose that percolator for me herself!"

"Them that likes it can have it," returned Rosanna. "To my mind, it's more bother than it's worth. I like my own way the best; and, if I do say it, I can make a cup of coffee that'll do your heart good."

"Louis and myself can testify to that," said Sebastian, genially. He had been standing while his brother talked, looking with a kindly if somewhat forced smile at the old woman.

"Indeed, then, you can!" said Rosanna, with a chuckling laugh. "For your dear mamma used to be afeard that you'd ruin your nerves drinkin' the coffee I used to make for you on Sundays and holydays. I well remember one St. Patrick's Day. The pair of you had been out with Miss Margie, lookin' at the procession. A bitter cold day it was; for I went with you to Fourteenth Street, where you stood on the steps of a house. I was that frozen I had to go back home. And down I went to the kitchen and made a pot of coffee, though the cook had like to eat the head off me for doin' it; and I brought it up and served it to you in the school-room where you used to study your lessons. Your mamma came in after a while and said: 'Now, Rosanna, don't let these children, and especially Sebastian, drink too much of that coffee. It will destroy their nerves.' Then you spoke up—I mind the look of you as if it were yesterday: 'Oh, no, mamma!

I haven't got any nerves.' Your mamma began to laugh, and she said: 'Well, I suppose, as it's St. Patrick's Day, and you're so very cold, I can't object. But put plenty of cream in it, Rosanna.'"

The old woman heartily enjoyed the reminiscence, the while she poured out the cups for the two brothers.

"This *is* splendid," said Sebastian, sitting down and tasting the beverage; "though I don't think it's any better than the coffee you used to make for us long ago."

"That's what I say," assented the old woman. "Just put in the right mixture, and set it on the stove, with a quick boil; a few minutes to settle, with a sup of cold water, and it's ready. Them cookies, Mr. Sebastian, were made fresh to-day."

"I wish Margie were here to taste them, too," said Sebastian. "Then our coffee party would be complete."

"And just as it used to be," murmured Rosanna, with a sigh, to which Sebastian narrowly suppressed a responsive one.

He had been longing so of late for the old, care-free days, when the brothers and sister had enjoyed Rosanna's dainties. And he now sat opposite his brother, in luxurious enjoyment not only of the refreshment which Rosanna had provided, but of the moral atmosphere about him. For oftentimes simple, homely comfort, and simple, homely kindness, are

the best sedatives for an oppressed spirit, or for one weary of perpetual struggle and strife.

The telephone bell in Louis' office suddenly broke upon them with insistent clamor and jangle; and the Doctor, with a groan, hastened away to answer it. Scarcely had he gone when Rosanna bent over Sebastian's shoulder and whispered:

"Did you ever hear tell of a person they call Elmira?"

Now, if she had aimed a pistol at Sebastian's head he could not have been more startled.

"Elmira?" he stammered,—"*Elmira?* Who is she?"

The old woman, noting his agitation, regarded him gravely and with a touch of apprehension.

"That's what I don't know," she declared; "but there's them that's got that name on their lips, and is turnin' it—God forgive them!—to a bad use."

"O my God," he cried, letting his overstrained feelings pour forth in a veritable groan of anguish. "And what can I do,—what can I do?"

It was the first confession of weakness that the old woman had heard from Sebastian, at least since he had grown to manhood; and, together with the unmistakable anguish of the tone, it impressed her deeply. Nothing would have made that faithful soul believe evil of the young man; but something, she

felt instinctively, had happened to cloud that hitherto sunlit life.

Rosanna's hand was on his arm with kindly touch, and her face was bent still closer to him, as she said:

"My poor lamb! 'There's trouble of some kind heavy on you, and there's only one that you can tell it to with safety, and that's the priest of God."

She paused impressively, while Sebastian let his head fall upon his breast in a movement of hopeless dejection.

"Mind what I'm tellin' you!" the old woman continued. "It's to him you should go with your troubles and trials, be what they may. And take his advice, instead of stayin' away—as I'm heart sorry to hear you are doin'—from the altar of God and from the confessional."

"But, Rosanna—" began Sebastian.

Fearing that Louis would return, Rosanna hurried on:

"Yes, a sore crush it was to me to hear that you, who were ever and always Godfearin', should give up goin' to church. And now mark me! It's no question I'm askin' you, for it doesn't concern me to know. But I bid you to be on your guard of some about you, and to do as I'm after tellin' you; and the blessin' of God will be with you, and help you out of the black waters of sorrow and trouble."

Sebastian had no time to say a word; for Louis came in, explaining that it had been

the nurse of one of his patients who was asking some special instructions for the night, and congratulating himself that he had not to go forth again—just then.

Rosanna, surmising, perhaps, that the two had something to say to each other, declared that it was time for her to retire, since she had to be up at cockcrow in the morning; and, bidding them good-night, she departed.

Sebastian, to whom the hint dropped by Rosanna had occasioned a new and acute perturbation, was by this time master of himself. It seemed as if the accumulated difficulties that were gathering around him acted as a stimulus. He would meet them boldly; he would do his best, and resist to the utmost, and as long as that were possible, all pressure brought upon him to break the silence which he had both implicitly and explicitly promised beside his dead father. That weakness which he had just displayed to Rosanna must not be repeated.

As an aid to maintaining his outward composure, he lit and began to smoke one of the cigars which Louis had pushed toward him; while his brother, sitting down opposite, did likewise.

"As I was telling you," Louis began, "one of my colleagues, Dr. Dever, who is at present a partner of Dr. Home Martin, has taken a tremendous fancy to Margie. He first met her here last winter, and then he was down at the

sea that time before father's death. He was absent after that for some time, studying on the Continent; but since he came home they met again, while she was away with Mrs. Rollins; and so the links have been formed in that chain of sentiment."

Sebastian listened in silence, his outward demeanor giving no clue to the new anxieties that were gathering round and torturing him interiorly.

"I am telling you all this," Louis said; "though possibly Margie has been talking to you upon the subject."

"No," replied Sebastian, "she has not said a word to me about any such matter. She would not be very likely to do so. And I have been unusually busy of late—"

"Too busy, I should say!" interjected Louis, after which, there was a pause.

"To my mind," Louis went on, "it would be a good thing for Margie. Dever is in all respects a fine fellow. He is a Catholic, of course (which would weigh with Margie), and rising in his profession, besides having some private means. And Margie herself will be so well fixed there will be no need to wait for a millionaire."

Louis stopped again, and turned for encouragement to his brother; but the latter's face, as he looked straight in front of him, seemed white and set.

"I was through the P. and S. with him," Louis resumed, thus alluding to that dignified

and venerable body of the College of Physicians and Surgeons; "and I can assure you he is just the sort of man for one's sister to marry. And Margie is deserving of the best."

Since Louis was gazing at him with surprised inquiry, Sebastian at last broke silence.

"I think," he said slowly, "that it is inadvisable."

"What is inadvisable?" Louis asked, with some irritation.

"Any question of marriage for Margie just now."

"And how far will that 'just now' extend?" Louis inquired sarcastically.

The query gave Sebastian, more than anything else could have done, the measure of his own powerlessness; for he could not go on opposing people's marriages indefinitely. He could only gain time, and, like the traditional drowning man, grasp at straws.

"I mean," he said, "that Margie is very young."

"Girls often marry at the age of twenty," answered Louis; "and, though she might wait, such men as Dever are not always forthcoming, and, to my mind, not lightly to be put aside."

"I know all that," said Sebastian. "But, somehow, I should have thought that perhaps Margie was cut out for a Sister of Charity, or something."

Louis laughed.

"That's one way of looking at the matter,

certainly," he admitted; "but one which altogether concerns Margie. For my part, I like to see good women, occasionally, stay in the world. I don't know, of course, whether or no she has given the Doctor any encouragement. Dever was reticent on that point. But I hope you will be prepared to give your unqualified approval to the affair."

"My approval is not necessary," Sebastian said, in a low tone.

"In a sense it is,—or at least your moral support. For, besides the position you occupy as practically the head of the family, you have always had great influence with Margie."

"I should rather be inclined to throw any influence I might have into the opposite scale."

"Why?" inquired Louis.

"Partly for the reasons I have mentioned."

Louis threw his cigar with an impatient movement upon the ash tray, and, leaning his arms upon the table, looked fixedly at his brother.

"If one like Alfred," he said, "talked that way, I should know what to think. But *you* will have to give me some very much better reason for opposing this marriage—if oppose it you do."

"I can give no other reason," Sebastian said firmly.

"Then I shall advise Dever to go ahead and do his best to win; and Margie will be quite

justified in passing you and your opinions by unheeded."

"I can only do what I can to dissuade her," said Sebastian, tranquilly; his voice sounded almost gentle in its concentrated effort at calmness. His cigar, which had burned down, emitted sufficient smoke partly to obscure his face, and its fiery-red spark burned fiercely.

"Then," said Louis, growing heated, and speaking as he had never before spoken to Sebastian, for whose capabilities and way of acting he had both respect and admiration, "you will be acting like a fool!"

"What is folly and what is wisdom?" asked Sebastian, leaning back in his chair, with a slight shrug of the shoulders. "Relative terms, both of them."

"It will be worse than folly," continued Louis,— "it will be criminal, downright wrong to interfere in such an affair."

"Once again I might ask," said Sebastian, "what is right and what is wrong? 'They are not always at opposite ends of the compass.'"

"These enigmatical sentences," cried Louis, "won't help matters at all!"

"I wish I knew what *would* help!" exclaimed Sebastian.

"You seem to be adopting some new attitude about everything," declared Louis, impatiently. "Knowing you as I do, I don't want to say it is a pose."

There was a strained smile playing about

Sebastian's lips, as he met the other's gaze, that made the physician in Louis uneasy. "Could it be the mind?" he thought. "For overwork, overstrain, plays the very mischief with fellows." But no: the expression of Sebastian's face, the strength of will displayed there, put to rest his brother's momentary misgivings. Neither could his attitude, he thought—for instance, in regard to Margie,—have any relation with that absence from church which Rosanna had deplored, nor yet that at which Mrs. Alfred had hinted.

"Margie," Louis went on, calming down from his late tone of irritation, "is not one to take up an inclination lightly. And if it be the case that she favors Dever—which seems probable, since the Doctor has spoken to me,—it would be the greatest mistake in the world to thwart her inclinations."

"I hope," said Sebastian, rising, and speaking in that same deadly quiet tone that sounded as if it came from a distance,—“I hope you and Dr. Dever are mistaken, and that Margie's affections are not engaged.”

"Let me tell you," said Louis, growing hot again, "that they can never be better bestowed."

But Sebastian waved that aside.

"It would be infinitely better," he said, "if her thoughts turned toward the convent."

"Why," cried Louis, "your reasoning is enough to set any one crazy! Just because

she is your petted sister you want to shut her up in a convent!"

"It is because," said Sebastian, suddenly resolving to trust Louis so far, "her marriage would entail something very painful, that will have to be done."

Louis stared at him, with once more a dawning fear as to his sanity.

"And what about your own marriage?" he said almost involuntarily; for his powers of observation had not been idle during the intermissions at the concert, when Sebastian and Dorothy Kent had been in conversation.

Sebastian's face flushed, and then slowly whitened again.

"My marriage," he said with deliberation, "so far as I can see now, will never take place."

"Isn't that an absurdity?" Louis exclaimed.

But he was already beginning to feel decidedly uncomfortable for having thus unwarrantably intruded upon his brother's private affairs. And he was convinced, moreover, that there was something—some mystery—to explain all these incongruities in the conduct of Sebastian, who had hitherto been congruous, consistent, and above all reasonable, in his thoughts and mode of action.

Sebastian, however, would not say any more; but, taking up his hat, prepared for departure. At the door Louis remarked:

"My dear fellow, if I have been at all hasty in any of my expressions, I apologize."

Sebastian, looking at him with a smile, held out his hand.

"I know—I understand," he said; "and you and I certainly have Margie's best interests at heart."

When he found himself in the street, he hurried along, walking very rapidly, as though that phantom thought which was his daily and hourly companion were pursuing him. His footsteps sounded unnaturally loud, he fancied, in the deserted streets; and he started nervously when a private watchman, lantern in hand, emerged suddenly from one of the brown stone areas. "I am getting to have all the marks of a guilty conscience," Sebastian murmured to himself. "Before all is done I shall pass for a criminal." He continued his rapid pace, still feeling that the engrossing thought, which had become almost tangible and material, was keeping pace with him amongst the solemn shadows of the brown stone houses falling across the pavements.

At his own door he stood a moment and looked out upon the Park; and it seemed to him that a whole generation in the life of man must have elapsed since that afternoon when he had driven home from the office with his father, and had stood smiling at the thoughts which a conversation between him and his late parent had evoked.

XV.

NEXT day Sebastian nerved himself to speak to Margie on the subject. And this he dreaded most of all; for the very thought of hurting her in any way, of coming between her and her happiness, was painful to him beyond words. He had always been the one to shield her from every pain and trouble, and even discomfort of any kind. And now it was he who must bring into her life perhaps the sharpest trouble she had ever known, or so he judged from his own recent experience. The brother and sister had not had a confidential chat for some time; indeed, Sebastian was constantly afraid of getting on confidential terms with any one. He felt the unpleasantness of his task the more acutely because he thought he had noticed in Margie, of late, a new brightness and exhilaration. Her small and delicately formed face, which when in repose had been quiet almost to sadness, had now gained both color and animation. Always mobile, it reflected just then thoughts that were evidently happy ones.

He made his way to her own little sitting-room, where she usually received her visitors,

and amongst them, as Sebastian reflected, Dorothy Kent. That thought arrested him upon the threshold,—perhaps she might be there. But no: Margie was singing to herself, in her low crooning voice. Evidently she was alone. He knocked and was admitted. It was a charming room; in its graceful simplicity and absence of superfluous ornament, entirely characteristic of Margie.

“O Sebastian!” the young girl said, her face flushing with pleasure at sight of her brother. “I am so glad! I so seldom see you now!”

She made him take a cushioned armchair, into which he sank luxuriously; for he had just come into the house.

“This *is* comfort, Margie!” he said. “But you have a genius for comfort,—one of the greatest a woman can possess. I am always so glad to get away from down-town, with its endless noise and struggle!”

He closed his eyes for a moment in enjoyment of the rest; and Margie’s loving glance noted how much thinner and paler he was looking.

“Is—is business going on well?” she inquired.

“Oh, yes,” said Sebastian, “famously! But it is like a monster swallowing men alive. And the bigger it grows, the more of us does it swallow.”

Before his mental vision, as he rested for those few minutes, loomed the huge bales of goods filled to overflowing with costly stuffs;

and he seemed to hear, through the silence, the voices of the various employees in a kind of orderly discord, giving or receiving orders, and mingling with the hum, deepening at times into a roar, of the thoroughfares without. In his ears sounded again the many voices that had spoken to him in his office or at the telephone, whose insistent jangle had mingled with all those other noises. What moments had come to him that day, however, both within and without the four walls of that building! For he, at twenty-eight years of age, had been asked to be president of a great merger, and practically to direct the destinies of several firms, in every one of which were graybeards. In addition to all else, Sebastian had had a visit from Alfred, who had been particularly annoying and suspicious; and had not only sought to meddle with those vast schemes which he could not understand, but had harped upon family matters, and brought into the order of the business office the discord that had crept into the home.

Sebastian was thinking, as he rested thus quietly, without interruption from restful and tactful Margie, of the intolerable boredom of such a man, and of all that he had said and done. He had asked questions of the clerks. He had nearly driven to distraction the head bookkeeper, a man of worth and experience, and had got roundly snubbed for his pains. He had interviewed certain customers, and, by his clumsiness and the hints he threw out as to

Sebastian's inefficiency, had very nearly persuaded them to take their names off the firm's books. Some of this retrospective irritation Sebastian, contrary to his custom, put into words.

"I'm a little more tired than usual to-day," he admitted. "Alfred was down."

"Oh!" exclaimed Margie, with a gesture. She was sitting on a low stool near the window, her chin resting upon her hand. "But doesn't he go down every day?"

"Well, yes, he does; but usually his visits are very perfunctory. To-day he was the lion rampant."

"I suppose *she* had been talking to him," said Margie, indignantly.

"Possibly," continued Sebastian. "I tried, in any case, to be very calm and philosophic. But," he added, with a laugh, "I am afraid if Louis had been there he would have resorted to drastic measures. I saw the head bookkeeper, Johnson, who is invaluable to the firm, and has to be treated with deference, looking at the blue shades of the window while Alfred was talking to him. He seemed to be calculating the height of that window from the ground. Desperate measures were in his eye. Alfred was particularly anxious, amongst other things, to get from him the list of my personal expenditure. I came up behind him at the moment and said: 'If you have any curiosity on that score, Alfred, you need not trouble this busy man,

who has more than he can do just now. If you come into my office, I can give you all that information in five minutes.'"

"Wasn't that splendid?" said Margie. "But did he not seem to feel ashamed?"

"I rather think he did," Sebastian replied. "He murmured some kind of an apology, and he unwillingly accepted my invitation to the office, looking rather red and hot. I insisted upon jotting down for him everything that I have spent in the last six months. He protested more than once, but I spared him none of the items. And I wound up by saying: 'You may as well take this with you. I know Mrs. Alfred will be interested.'"

Sebastian's eyes were full of a half-humorous, half-angry light as he related the incident; and Margie laughed outright.

"I'm glad you said that," she declared; "for I do think it isn't nearly so much Alfred's fault as hers."

"Poor old chap!" agreed Sebastian. "Sometimes I feel sorry for him. He is so terribly wife-ridden."

"Yes, poor Alfred!" said Margie the soft-hearted. "I remember him, before he was married, as the big brother. He was good-natured enough then, only the least little fussy and irritating at times."

Both were silent for a time, as though they had exhausted the subject. Margie still chin in hand, looked out over the square; while

Sebastian, watching her through half-closed eyes, wondered how he should broach that painful subject and say the disagreeable things that had to be said.

"Margie," he resumed at last, "Louis was talking to me the other night about an admirer of yours,—Dr. Dever."

Margie's sensitive face was overspread with a quick blush.

"Oh, yes!" she said. "You have not met him yet?"

"No," rejoined Sebastian; "though Louis tells me you have known him some time."

"I met him that summer before father's death," Margie answered simply. "Then he went abroad to study, and I did not see him again until that time I went away with Mrs. Rollins."

"So far, Louis told me," said Sebastian; "and perhaps there was a time when you would have told me yourself,—but that is not meant as a reproach."

"Well, you see," explained Margie, "poor father's death put everything else out of my head for a time. Then there was nothing particular to tell until a few weeks ago. And you have been so busy!"

"Yes," said Sebastian, "I know it was my fault. I have been, as you say, very busy, and my mind has been full of all sorts of affairs. But how does the matter stand now?"

"Gerald Dever has asked me to decide."

"So," said Sebastian, "it has gone as far as that? But you did not promise,—you did not give him any definite answer?"

"No," answered Margie, though she was somewhat surprised at that observation. "I told him I must have time,—that I wanted to be quite certain of myself."

Sebastian fell back in his chair with a look of relief.

"That is right, Margie," he said. "Take as much time as possible to make up your mind. And I may as well tell you that I should be exceedingly glad if your decision was unfavorable."

Margie stared open-mouthed at her brother. What could he possibly mean? What could be his objection to Gerald Dever, whom so many people, and amongst them the fastidious Louis, was lauding to the skies?

"But why?" she asked at last.

"I can not tell you," said Sebastian; "and, Margie, you must not ask—unless the necessity becomes vital."

As the brother and sister then sat facing each other, it seemed to Sebastian as if it were a struggle between two souls, or at least two hearts, that was filling those few seconds. For, though in his own soul the struggle had seldom been absent since that revelation of his father's, it had never been more acute than at the present instant. He would have given almost anything to be able to enter into Margie's sentiments, and

to aid her by every means in his power to the attainment of her happiness. He felt tempted as he had never before been tempted, to abandon the too difficult duty which he had undertaken of shielding his father's memory. For why, after all, should he have assumed such a burden, which seemed likely to estrange him from all those whom he held dear? Why should he, for instance, allow Margie to regard him as a tyrant who, for the mere semblance of authority, should be willing to stand in her way, or unwarrantably to interfere with whatever path she might choose to follow? Would it not be better to make known what he had discovered to all those concerned, save perhaps his mother, and to let them deal with the situation as each one best might?

But at that instant the closed eyes, the set features of his father, more pathetic and appealing than they had ever been in life, came before him, pleading that he should not be held up to scorn, or, as it might be in Margie's case, to the indulgent pity of his own children. And, moreover, in the breaking of that silence, might he not inflict upon the girl beside him a suffering keener than that which the keeping of the secret would involve? His resolution was only strengthened by that momentary weakness. He determined that he would keep that silence inviolate, unless circumstances made it imperative upon him to do otherwise.

And, curiously enough, as he sat there, out

of the whirl and tumult of his thoughts rose the memory of an afternoon in the college chapel, when a great preacher had discoursed to the students on that choice between the right and the wrong that comes to every child of Adam at some moment in his career. The priest, though appealing to reason rather than to sentiment, had excited, at least in one of his hearers, an intense enthusiasm. Sebastian Wilmot had vowed that, come what might, he would accept that challenge, and, when opportunity offered, fight against wrong, in whatsoever form, under that Leader whom the preacher had indicated.

Since that time, alas! the world into which he had so early plunged, as well as that home where religion, for most of its inmates, had been but a secondary matter, and the great principles by which conduct is controlled but dimly understood, had cooled the enthusiasm of the boy. It had become in the man something like apathy. He had never, indeed, diverged to any notable extent from the straight path; but he had followed it languidly, suffering the end whither it led to be obscured. Moreover, there had been cases, such as the present, when right and wrong had become confused and almost interchangeable terms. So it had happened that, at the approach of the great trial which had called for all his force, he had let go some of his main defences in trying to bear it; though he was quite conscious that such strength as

remained to him had been derived from those first resources.

The few words which Rosanna had said had poignantly brought home to him all that he had sacrificed in striving to be true to his father's memory. He had realized during the long hours of a sleepless night how far he had wandered from the ideals of his college life, when he could have remained away from church and from the Sacraments; and for a fear which might, after all, have but little foundation in reality. In the back of his mind, however, was always the hope, dim and unexpressed, that something would turn up, through the finding of that long-missing Elmira, which should put everything to rights, while still leaving inviolate his promise of silence; after which, he told himself, he would return to his Father's house with more fervor and enthusiasm than ever. For the faith that had remained so strong in him during his strange defection had been in itself a torment, greater perhaps than all the others; and to that torment Rosanna's words had added a fresh pang.

In the new crisis that had arisen concerning Margie and her future prospects, more than ever he felt the need of a wise counsellor. His thoughts turned, now, as they had done so many times before, to the old priest who had come with the welcome intelligence of his father's conversion. Powerfully, indeed, did that personality appeal to him; and he felt

a sudden irresistible desire to tell him all and abide by his advice. But so strong were the imaginary obstacles to this straightforward course that he could not decide to enter there-upon. He hovered uncertainly at its entrance; while a hundred hands seemed outstretched to hold him back, and, as is frequent in such cases, to prevent him from pressing onward to peace.

Margie, who felt the strange constraint that had grown up between this once absolutely congenial brother and herself, and who was surprised and deeply wounded by the few words which he had spoken, sat glancing from time to time at the tense face of Sebastian, with the lines that had been carved there of late, and waited until he spoke again.

"Margie," he said, "Louis has everything that is good to say of Dr. Dever, and I can take his word for that. He is not easily pleased, and even less easily deceived. So only one thing I am hoping: that, since worth does not always win feminine recognition, your inclinations may run in a contrary direction."

He felt that his sentences were ponderous, involved, and absurd in their conclusions. Margie straightened up her little figure, and there was a gleam in the soft eyes but rarely seen there.

"That," she said, "is a matter between Gerald Dever and myself, which I am not disposed to discuss with any one."

"And you are right," said Sebastian, though there was a new look of pain on his face, since he took this defiance to mean that the hope he had just expressed was futile. "And I wish to God that I need go no further, instead of being forced to say that, in my judgment, there are grave objections, at least for the present, to any idea of your marriage!"

"Sebastian," cried Margie, "I begin to think that it is true what they say of you: that you have changed,—that you are trying to rule everyone, to interfere in people's concerns, just because father left you in charge of the affairs!"

Sebastian, who had never heard her speak so to him before, looked at her, with a smile upon his lips that was almost ghastly, as he said:

"Et tu, Brute!"

Then he got up from the chair where all this time he had been sitting.

"I think," he replied gently, "there is no use in discussing the matter further. I have said all that I can say, and done all that it is in my power to do."

As Margie remained silent, he went slowly out of the room and into the seclusion of his own apartment, with a new feeling of loneliness and isolation. Human props were failing fast, as they have a trick of doing,—even those upon which the heart most entirely depends. He sat quite still, while the shadows gathered round him. How typical they were of the

appalling darkness that falls at times upon the human soul,—a kind of foreshadowing and presentiment of that final darkness into which it must take its flight alone! And that darkness goes down into the innermost depths, where no light reaches.

But those words, the tone in which they were uttered no less than the look by which they were accompanied, had pierced Margie to the depth of her sensitive little heart and filled her with intolerable self-reproach. Sebastian could not tell how short or how long was the interval that ensued until he heard a step in the passage outside and a knocking at his door. He arose at once, and found there upon the threshold Margie, with a sobbing entreaty to be forgiven. He threw the door wide open, and placed a chair for her, upon which she would not sit down until she had poured forth what was in her heart!"

"I know I was wrong, Sebastian!" she cried. "I am perfectly sure that, no matter what any one says, you are trying to do what you think is best, and that you must have strong reasons for speaking as you did a few moments ago."

Sebastian, approaching, laid a light, caressing hand upon her hair, while the grieved little face looked up at him as he remembered to have seen it do in childhood.

"Well, Margie," he said, "perhaps I shall never be able to explain to you how much those

words, and your trust in me—that must be so hard just now,—mean to me. God knows I need them sorely!”

The tears began to fall unbidden from the girl's eyes at that complaint, the first she had ever heard from her brother's lips. And so the pact of peace and good-will that had existed so many years between brother and sister remained unbroken, and, as Margie vowed to herself, should always so remain, whatever might befall.

XVI.

ALL this time there had been a marked estrangement between Sebastian and his mother, especially since the affair of the house had come to a climax. Alfred, acting with her knowledge and consent, and strongly impelled by his wife, had one day put upon the front of the house a sign with the words, "For Sale." When Sebastian came home in the afternoon he saw what had been done. His annoyance was beyond bounds, but he managed to subdue all signs of it before he went into the living room, where his mother was engaged upon a piece of embroidery. It was a large apartment, comfortably furnished, abounding in easy-chairs; with a large lounge, a desk laden with magazines and papers, and an elaborate table of wicker, beside which his mother was working. Sebastian addressed her in that tone of deference, even of tenderness, which he always employed to her; but he went straight to the point.

"I see," he said, "that a sign has been put upon the front of the house."

"Yes," replied Mrs. Wilmot, concealing the uneasiness which she could not help feeling:

"it was Alfred who had it put there this morning."

"Oh, indeed!" said Sebastian. "And may I ask, mother, if it was with your knowledge and consent?"

"Of course," she rejoined, with a defiant flushing of her cheeks. "I have often told you that I think this house should be sold, so as to permit us to move into another more suitable. And, since you paid no attention to my wishes, I allowed Alfred to act."

"Since Alfred has acted with your approbation," said Sebastian, firmly, "I am more sorry than words can say. But I shall have to have that board taken down. This house is not for sale."

The blood rushed still more hotly into Mrs. Wilmot's face, and her eyes flashed fire.

"Do you dare," she said, "to countermand the order that I have given, and to set yourself up in opposition just out of spite against your brother, and to show the authority which your father was foolish enough to place in your hands?"

Sebastian remained mute, taking up one of the magazines from the desk and mechanically turning over its pages. He himself saw how singular seemed his attitude, and how it must appear in the eyes of his mother; but he had no resource. She, at least, must never be told that secret which affected her most deeply of all. And yet the terms of his father's last

instructions were explicit; that the house in Gramercy Park should not be sold, nor in any way alienated from the estate, until the mystery concerning the disappearance of Elmira should be cleared up, she and her child found, and their share justly apportioned. It seemed as if in this way he had guarded against any possible changes or disasters to the business of Wilmot & Co., which might render forever impossible that act of expiation which lay so heavily upon his soul. This ultimatum of his had been contained in the secret instructions, which Sebastian could not show to any one, thereby aggravating his dilemma. For the will had merely declared that the Gramercy Park property could be sold at the discretion of the youngest son, Sebastian, and at such time as he should think proper. Sebastian heartily wished that his father had arranged it in some other way, or that he had even permitted him to put aside out of his own share a sufficient apportionment for the missing wife and child.

“You have turned out very badly!” cried the mother, angered more by his silence, which she knew to be unrelenting, than she would have been by any arguments. “You have proved yourself obstinate, ungrateful, unnatural, in opposing the wishes of your widowed mother, who has been unfortunate enough to be left in your hands. I can never forgive you; nor can I forgive your dead father for the wrong

he has done me in giving you control. If, instead of giving Alfred merely an advisory voice in these matters, he had placed things in his hands, how different it all would have been for me!"

Sebastian's eyes were fixed upon the book; his slight, almost boyish figure was tense and rigid; while upon his face there was an expression of suffering that might well have touched a harder heart than that of Mrs. Wilmot. And it would certainly have touched hers, had she not been carried away by a torrent of angry emotions that rendered her incapable either of noticing anything or of exercising the slightest self-control.

Sebastian, indeed, was surprised, even humiliated, as her language became more violent. From boyhood upward, her sons had known her chiefly as impulsively good-natured, emotional, and generally disposed to espouse their cause on the few occasions when their more domineering, if sluggish, father had roused himself to unusual severity. And Sebastian had been particularly devoted to his mother from the time when, as a small boy, he had run her errands, and considered it his greatest privilege to go out with her to market and elsewhere. Her chidings had usually been of a very passing nature, and scarcely ever had she carried out the threats of punishment into which she was sometimes led. Her disciplinary powers had, in truth, been mostly in abeyance;

and her children had, therefore, come to consider her as an epitome of easy good nature.

To Sebastian, as he listened, there was in the torrent of words which his mother poured forth a suggestion of the scoldings of his childhood; but never had they partaken of the intense and almost malignant bitterness which now characterized her speech. It was evident that this was not only the outcome of wrath, which had been long seething within her, but was also the injected venom of some other nature.

"Mother, mother," he cried at last, rising from where he sat and throwing himself on his knees beside her, with something of the old boyish fervor, "can't you see, can't you feel, that I would cut off my right hand rather than do anything of my own accord that could displease you?"

The mother, though somewhat mollified by this address and the manner of its delivery, which meant much from one usually so calm and self-contained as Sebastian, kept her face turned away, while the flush of anger still burned upon her cheeks and her eyes were aflame.

"And all this is the more terrible," said Sebastian, in a low, concentrated voice, "that I can do nothing,—that I am forced to go on opposing you. Even in this matter of the sign upon the house it is my duty to have it

removed, since I must veto any attempt at selling the property."

"Then get out of my sight!" said the mother, furiously. "And neither speak to me nor attempt to hold any communication with me until you are willing to comply with my wishes."

"That must be as you will, mother," answered the young man, rising slowly to his feet and standing erect before her.

"For you know very well," went on the mother, "that your father never meant me to be forced to live anywhere against my will."

"Of course he never meant that," said Sebastian; "and needless for me to repeat that you are free to leave this house to-morrow and to buy or rent whatever sort of a house may suit you."

"I will take no other until this is sold," replied the mother, obstinately.

"Then I am sorry," said Sebastian—"it is useless to repeat how sorry,—but it can not be done now."

"Though the will allowed it to be done at your discretion," sneered the mother.

"The will was, unfortunately, not the only instruction that remained to me," said Sebastian.

"If there are other instructions, why not show them at least to Alfred, if you have such a contempt for feminine judgment; or to Louis, to whom your rancor does not seem to extend?"

"Since those instructions were for me alone,

I can not show them," answered Sebastian; "but I can assure you that they make any discretionary power concerning the selling of this house merely nominal. I have, in fact, none."

"We have, as Caroline was saying only yesterday," declared Mrs. Wilmot, "altogether too much assertion without proof. And I should be in favor of selling this house and defying you to do your worst."

"But, dear mother, it can not be done; for the wording of the will at least supports, though vaguely, the precise nature of my instructions. And I beg of you not to permit yourself, on the advice of any one, to do what is rash and what would be disastrous for us all."

Afraid that he might say too much, and aware of the futility of further argument, Sebastian left the room; and with firm though reluctant hand he removed the signboard from the house. The news of that proceeding was conveyed to Mrs. Wilmot by Alfred and his wife, who paid their daily visit to the mansion just in time, as they said, to catch Sebastian in the act. And it served to rekindle anew the mother's anger, which had temporarily smouldered; so that she permitted week after week to elapse and gave no sign of relenting toward her youngest son.

Alfred had at first attempted a remonstrance.

"I think, Sebastian," he said, "that that was a most unjustifiable proceeding of yours

to remove the board which I had put up.”

Sebastian looked at him quietly, through half-shut eyes.

“Wasn’t it the least bit in the world unjustifiable for you to put it up without consulting me?”

“I fail to see,” Alfred began, “why I, who am your senior in years, and of some legal standing, should be obliged to submit to your dictation.”

“I can not remember at this moment,” said Sebastian, calmly, “any occasion when I tried to dictate to you or to interfere in the smallest particular in your affairs.”

“Well, then, in my mother’s affairs,” blustered Alfred, working himself up into a weak man’s irascibility. “It is just the same.”

“Very far from being the same,” declared Sebastian, “since her affairs in this case are inextricably mixed up—well, let us say with mine.”

“You’re an impertinent, officious, bull-headed trampler on other people’s rights!” cried Alfred, beginning to propel his plump and loose-hung person about the room, with his hands behind his back, and his short steps that gave him a curious resemblance to an enraged gobbler.

“Come, come!” said Sebastian. “This is merely childish. My personal characteristics have nothing to do with the matter. Let us descend to facts. I had always supposed that

legal functionaries were great upholders of the law."

"They see the advantages," admitted Alfred, quieting down under his brother's slightly contemptuous calm, "of putting things on a proper legal basis."

"Exactly!" agreed Sebastian. "And the law, I suppose, gives a man, even after his death, the right to say what shall be done with his own property?"

"That is beside the question," said the brother, perceiving whither he was being led.

"Not to a lawyer, surely!" exclaimed Sebastian.

"The point under dispute here is," went on Alfred, "that at the suggestion, or at least with the concurrence, of my mother—"

"And wife," put in Sebastian, with a twinkle in his eye.

"I put up that board announcing this house for sale. It was my right to do so, as the eldest son, and as my mother's representative,—as my wife, indeed, pointed out to me."

"Since your wife does not share the advantage of belonging to the legal fraternity," said Sebastian, "she might very easily be mistaken in supporting that view of the matter. But you must be perfectly aware that you put up a board illegally, which I took down legally."

Alfred stared.

"What do you mean?" he demanded.

"Just what I always meant: that my father,

in appointing me to carry out his wishes implicit and explicit, conferred upon me the legal right to do so."

Sebastian's voice had lost its half-jesting tone, and was stern and incisive, as he continued:

"I have acted in this matter, as in others, not only within my rights, but according to the plain duty imposed upon me. I am deeply grieved that this duty should run counter to the wishes of mother, but I warn you that I will tolerate no interference from any others in its discharge."

Alfred's lip quivered, and his fat, puffy face showed that he was a prey to strong emotion, while Sebastian added:

"I would be truly glad if your legal knowledge helped you to put an end to a state of affairs that has transformed this house into—well, to put it very mildly, a debating society."

"I wonder," spluttered Alfred, "what father meant by making me an adviser, and, as you told me yourself, regretting in his last conversation with you that Louis and I were not of the firm."

"All that is true," said Sebastian; "and it might seem arbitrary, indeed, to put aside your advice or that of Louis in such a matter as the one we have been discussing, save for imperative reasons given me by my father, and which I can not disregard."

"We have only your word for that," observed Alfred.

"And my word will have to be sufficient. So I think we may as well regard this matter as closed, unless some unforeseen contingency should arise, of which I will gladly advise you."

So Alfred, having thus gone down to defeat, was sufficiently convinced of the strength of his brother's position to attempt no further move toward the disposal of the property. But he remained upon the coolest terms possible with Sebastian, so as even to excite the remark of the various employees of the firm of Wilmot.

During all this period Mrs. Alfred took the tone of being a friendly intermediary amongst the warring factions of the family, and always showed toward Sebastian a benevolence which she plainly indicated was in spite of all his faults. She had on one occasion tried her hand with him on the vexed question of the house. It would be, she thought, a great triumph if by her diplomacy she could prevail where others had failed. Nor was she in the least deterred from the attempt by the ultimatum which Sebastian had given her husband. She had encouraged from the first Mrs. Wilmot's desire to leave a house which she had long disliked because of its unfashionable neighborhood, distant from all her friends, and because she thought it gloomy. This last opinion was, of course, strengthened by late events. Margie,

too, especially before her father's death, had always looked forward to a house farther uptown; and, though Mrs. Alfred had no particular desire to gratify her sister-in-law, it would be a satisfaction to show that she was able to accomplish such a result.

This belief in her own powers, in so far as Sebastian was concerned, rose, of course, from her wilful misunderstanding of his attitude in the matter. She believed him to be merely holding out, to emphasize his position of authority over them all,—a position which she bitterly resented. She could not gauge his affection for his mother and Margie, which would have led him to yield at once to their slightest wish had it been in his power. It was her habit, indeed, to take little cognizance of such sentiments, which had had singularly little influence upon her own life.

Therefore one evening, shortly after Sebastian's altercation with his elder brother, she led him into the living room after dinner, while the rest of the family pursued their way to the drawing-room. There, as was frequently the case, Margie sat down at the piano to play for them.

"My dear Sebastian," said Mrs. Alfred, carefully closing the door that she might not be disturbed by the music, "I have been wanting this long time to have a little chat with you."

Now, as Sebastian could not truthfully say that this desire of hers was by any means

reciprocal, he simply declared that it was very kind of her to think at all of a prosy man of affairs.

"Those affairs," cried Mrs. Alfred,—“my dear boy, I feel that you are overdoing them!”

“That is a feature of New York life,” said Sebastian, carelessly. “I should be quite out of fashion if I didn’t overdo.”

He was keenly on the alert all this time; for he was well aware that his sister-in-law had some purpose in view, and that it was not at all for the pleasure of his society that she had invited him to this interview, or that she was purring in her most caressing monotonous.

“Do you know,” she said, “I am going to be very bold, and talk to you a little about this affair of the house that is always bobbing up.”

“It certainly is on the carpet just at present,” agreed the young man, with a faint smile.

“You are so clever, Sebastian,” she went on, “and you know so exactly what ought to be done, that it seems ridiculous for me, who am not the least bit clever, to attempt to advise you.”

“You underrate yourself,” said Sebastian, with an irony that did not escape Mrs. Alfred. Nevertheless, she pursued her purring way.

“Alfred feels so keenly about it!” she remarked. “But I quite realize that, with all his talents and his great legal knowledge, he

is a blunderer at times. I tell him he is too honest."

"So you are not a believer in that old maxim of the copybooks?" inquired Sebastian, interestedly.

"Now you are quizzing me," said Mrs. Alfred, shaking a playful finger at him. "What I mean is that Alfred very often blurts out the wrong thing."

"That is serious for a lawyer," said Sebastian.

"He jars on people and irritates them."

"Come, come, Mrs. Alfred!" cried the young man. "I shall have to rise to the defence of my brother. If you were to say those things in public, you would ruin him professionally."

"You know very well what I mean, you mischievous creature!" she replied, vexed at the byplay, and that Sebastian could not be induced to take the matter seriously. "But, whether you do or not, I am going to say my little say."

"Which I am all attention to hear," said Sebastian, politely.

She drew her chair close to his, and laid her long, slender fingers lightly upon his arm. He noted carelessly how white they were against his coat sleeve.

"Now," began Mrs. Alfred, "I am going to put it to you this way. Think what it would mean to your darling mother, who in putting on the widow's weeds has had the greatest sorrow that can befall a woman; think what

it would mean to Margie, if you were to come home some day, and tell them that the house was sold. Nothing could make them so happy."

"Poor old house!" murmured Sebastian, looking about him. "Has it deserved so ill of us as that?"

"You know just how it is, you dear, teasing boy!" (Sebastian wondered idly at what age she would be willing to admit him to manhood.)

"The neighborhood is very far from being what it was. The house itself is heavy and cumbrous, and too large,—altogether too large in these days of inefficient servants; and, besides, it has such painful recollections."

"So has every place wherein men and women have lived for any time," replied Sebastian.

"And it would be such a graceful thing," went on Mrs. Alfred, "to let your beloved mother know that, though you offered some opposition at first, you were really anxious to please her."

"I hope I shall not have to sell a house to convince her of that," observed Sebastian.

"I thought you and I might just get up a little conspiracy."

"A-ha!" cried Sebastian. "That word has an ugly sound. I am the most straightforward of persons, quite unfit for spoils and stratagems. I had best leave them, perhaps, to—those who can lend them a charm."

"Very prettily said," declared Mrs. Alfred. "But really this would be such a beautiful

plot, with peace and good-will and happiness to everyone involved in its success."

"It would be perfect except for one detail," replied Sebastian.

"And what is that?"

"My inability to act in the matter."

"Fie, fie!" said Mrs. Alfred. "You know just as well as I do that you have power to do anything you please."

"It seems rather as if I had power to do nothing that I please, or by which I might please others."

His tone was touched with melancholy, but Mrs. Alfred was obstinate.

"By raising your little finger you could delight your mother, instead of grieving and displeasing her, as I am sorry to see you doing."

"Well," said Sebastian, "I regret exceedingly that I should be forced to give you so unpleasant an impression of me; but, unhappily, I can not help it."

"Just think," went on Mrs. Alfred, in the tone of one wheedling a wayward and wrong-headed child, "how it would please Margie too (you used to be very fond of Margie), and what it would mean to everybody."

"Myself included," added Sebastian; "for I might then have peace. But it can not be."

"Now confess, dear, that it is just because you have said so once and want to show how inflexible you are."

Sebastian, who was inwardly irritated almost to madness by her words, and still more by her manner of saying them, was constitutionally as incapable of saying a rude thing to a woman as he would have been of striking her. So he mastered his indignation, and remarked smilingly.

"That is a new and interesting light in which to view oneself."

"If," said Mrs. Alfred, "you would just come down from your dignity—as I was saying to Alfred, from your high horse,—you would make us all so happy, so blessed! Won't you promise me to do this and very soon?"

What struck Sebastian most of all at the moment was the self-conceit of the woman, who imagined that he would do for her, and because of her very transparent flattery, what he had refused to do for his mother and Margie. As for the opinion of himself thus implied, he let it pass, since it mattered not at all.

"I am sorry," he said, growing grave at last, "that, after all the words that have been wasted about this affair, there should still be any doubt as to my motives and intentions. I explained definitely to Alfred what I had stated so often before—that, according to father's testamentary instructions, this house can not be sold at the present time. My duty is clear—to obey his wishes."

Mrs. Alfred regarded the speaker, her eyes narrowing till they were almost closed, her face

breaking into a smile, which was often with her a sign of deadly anger.

"And, my dear brother-in-law," she said, "are you always such a slave to duty, such a stickler for what is right?"

Sebastian turned his eyes upon her with an inquiring glance, as, rising from her seat, Mrs. Alfred sped at him a parting shaft.

"If that is so, how is it that you have given up your religious duties? And what about—Elmira?"

If she had struck him in the face he could not have been more astounded, while there flashed through his mind the remembrance of what Rosanna had said, and the warning she had thrown out. How Mrs. Alfred had gained this knowledge he could not guess, nor was it possible for him to gauge the extent of her information. Neither did he in the least know how to deal with the matter. Thoughts chased each other tumultuously through his mind, while he strove to conceal the agitation that was so perfectly apparent to Mrs. Alfred. She rejoiced with malicious glee that the shot had gone home.

"I should not have said that," she conceded, however, "since Elmira can not possibly have anything to do with the sale of the house."

"Perhaps she may have more to do with it than you think," was the singular reply which Sebastian vouchsafed,—laughing, however, to try to pass off the remark as a jest.

"It seems to me," he said, "that this house is becoming haunted with all sorts of phantoms of people's brains, to which, I perceive, there is even an effort to give names as well as 'a local habitation.' So I myself think it is high time to make a move away from here, though the property can not be sold."

"Your mother would never consent to that," replied Mrs. Alfred; "nor would Alfred, who is so wise and careful."

"The true wisdom would be to make the best of what is inevitable," returned Sebastian, "and in the meantime to let each one of us attend to his or her own affairs."

After which he forestalled Mrs. Alfred in her evident intention of leaving the room. She knew to what he had referred by those last words; and, feeling that her attempt had egregiously failed, she stood looking after his retreating figure with vengeful glances, and conning over in her mind a variety of spiteful epithets, which she could not very well apply to him in public, but some of which at least she would rehearse for Alfred's delectation. And Sebastian, disappearing from her view, might well have felt that, like his illustrious namesake, arrows were being directed at him from every quarter, some of which must pierce the most invincible armor.

He was deeply concerned, in fact, by the mention by this woman of that portentous name of Elmira, which had startled him before

on the lips of Rosanna. His fear was that she had obtained whatever knowledge she might have by dipping into his father's papers; though it seemed impossible that she could have opened the safe. He felt, with something bordering on despair, that if she had really gained possession of that secret all was lost. Nor did it occur to him that she had used the name of that mysterious woman in connection with himself, and merely as a personal insult. The knowledge of such an error on her part would, indeed, have afforded him considerable relief from this new source of anxiety that was now added to all the rest.

XVII.

MUCH, very much, had been added to Sebastian's troubles and perplexities by the attitude assumed by Mrs. Alfred; and also by that talent of hers, an almost phenomenal acuteness, which led her just as often upon the wrong as the right track. Accordingly, it vexed her exceedingly that Sebastian should have been made the supreme arbiter of all their destinies; and this vexation was only aggravated by the consciousness that he merited the trust which his father had placed in him. However much she might have been disposed to deny him those necessary qualifications, there was always an inner voice that told her he possessed them.

It had annoyed her, too, from a very early stage in her married life to perceive the affection which Mrs. Wilmot was disposed to lavish upon her youngest son. To the newcomer into the family, it had seemed excessive; and, aided by the course of events, she had set herself, with what success has been seen, to estrange the mother from the son. With Margie she had not prevailed at all. That stout little champion stood up staunchly for her favorite brother, and the interloper's efforts had resulted only

in an undeclared but perfectly tangible antipathy between the sisters-in-law.

Louis was, in his own way, as impregnable against such assaults as Margie; but Mrs. Alfred often wondered if the cool and level-headed physician stood firm less because of any particular predilection for Sebastian than because he recognized his powers, and would do nothing to hinder their full application.

Mrs. Alfred had suspected from the first that something was amiss with Sebastian, and the finding of that paper had put her upon the wrong track. Therefore, though she did not usually permit herself to burst forth as she had done to Mrs. Rollins, she allowed friends of the family and the more intimate acquaintances to perceive that she feared something was wrong with Sebastian,—something which made him the object rather of her pity and indulgent benevolence than condemnation. The whispers which she set afloat, together with her gravely expressed doubts (to which she added those of Alfred) as to his competency for the management of the business, could not altogether fail of their effect. And though, in commercial matters, he was able to a considerable extent to live down such rumors—to show their absurdity, to discredit the source whence they came, and literally to sweep all before him by that strength, uprightness, and business acumen which amounted almost to genius,—socially it was otherwise.

He had never attained any very great prominence in the various circles of society wherein his people had moved, simply because he had a preference for staying at home as much as possible. And this reserve, and aversion to indiscriminate society, which had become more marked since his father's death, did not tend to increase his popularity. Nor could the power of his personality be exerted in dispelling such illusions, or giving the lie to those rumors against him which gradually gained force. The talk that went round took a wide range and was of the most extravagant and improbable description, so that Mrs. Alfred would have been sincerely shocked could she have known the consequences of her idle talk, or the conclusions drawn from her premises.

Now, under other circumstances, Mrs. Rollins would have been the first to set her face against such calumnies, and to have proclaimed her belief in Sebastian by having him more than ever in her company. But there was the delicate circumstance that she was entrusted with a young girl, the child of old friends,—a girl whom she herself loved as a dear daughter, and who had already shown an unusual partiality for this sheep who, Mrs. Alfred would have her think, was of sombre dye. She felt it her imperative duty to prevent the growing intimacy between the two; and she had perceived with concern the interest which each, all too evidently, took in the other upon that

evening of the concert. And although Dorothy Kent had agreed to receive no visits from Mr. Wilmot, or to hold with him any communication unknown to her protectress, she had stoutly and in her own peculiarly convincing way, refused to believe any evil of him.

Such was the state of affairs when Mrs. Rollins was astonished to receive, one afternoon, a visit from Sebastian himself. Like all those who knew him intimately, she was shocked to notice the change that had lately been wrought in him,—how much he had aged, how subdued was his manner, and how strong the suggestion of self-repression that he carried with him. Nevertheless, his manner and appearance impressed her, as they had always done, with an idea of strength, of mental vigor, and of self-control; and, shrewd woman of the world as she was, she saw in his whole bearing a something which, more forcibly than any words could have done, seemed to give the lie to all she had heard. But if her experience of life had made her perceptions keener, it had also taught her how frequently appearances may be deceptive. And anything seemed more likely than that Mrs. Alfred, whatever her personal prejudices might be, would deliberately, and without foundation, set to work to vilify her husband's brother.

As for Sebastian, apart from the hint which Dorothy had given him, he could not help being conscious of the constraint in his hostess'

manner and the coldness of her greeting. She supposed that he had merely come to pay what the French expressively call "a visit of digestion" after the dinner to which he had been invited; and Mrs. Rollins would have received him with the conventional courtesy that, like the sun, shines upon the good and bad alike; but there was the shadow of Dorothy in the background,—a shadow which no doubt this young man was hoping would presently materialize into the substance. The first preliminaries of conversation were sufficiently uncomfortable to both, and, unwilling to prolong them, Sebastian very speedily said:

"Apart from the pleasure of seeing you this afternoon, Mrs. Rollins, I am going to ask as a favor that I may have a few moments' private conversation with Miss Kent."

Mrs. Rollins hesitated, turning round upon her finger a superb ring, an opal set with diamonds, which had been the token of an engagement that had been followed by but a few years of marriage, when she had been left a widow. After having made that bold move, Sebastian sat back in his chair, with a peculiar effect, that he sometimes gave, of concentrated quietude. Nor was he unprepared for her words.

"I am afraid," Mrs. Rollins said at last—"and I may as well tell you now as at any other time—that I can not approve of—any

matrimonial intentions you may have concerning my friend Miss Dorothy Kent."

Quick as a flash came that answer, which was the very last she had expected to hear.

"Then let me assure you," the young man said impressively, "that at the present time I have no such intentions."

This reply was so astounding that for the moment it completely took away the hearer's self-possession and left her speechless. That first emotion of surprise was followed by one of resentment against Sebastian, and vexation that she had so clumsily placed both herself and Dorothy in a false position. It was a grave social blunder, indeed, to have seemed to misconstrue the young man's very ordinary attentions, and after so brief an acquaintance, into something serious; all the more that Sebastian Wilmot's wealth and social standing made him, from most points of view, an excellent match.

"I am exceedingly mortified," she began. "I can not forgive myself. What I have said is inexcusable."

But Sebastian, bending forward, cut short her apology, which she herself felt to be futile. There was upon the young man's face a grave, even melancholy expression, which, somehow, reassured her.

"I hope," he said, in a low voice, "that you will not misunderstand this statement that I have made, even though it is impossible for

me to explain or to qualify it in any degree. But you must be persuaded how deeply I should feel honored by the least notice from Miss Kent. I merely spoke to relieve your apprehensions, and to show that at this present time I am so overloaded with cares and responsibilities I must put marriage out of my thoughts." There was in his tone a deep sincerity struggling with some hidden feeling, as he thus burned his bridges behind him, that moved Mrs. Rollins to pity.

"Oh, you must forgive me my blundering interference!" she cried. "I am afraid Miss Kent would be very angry if she knew. But, you see, as she is under my charge, and as I have no daughter of my own, I am unnecessarily anxious."

"God knows," said Sebastian, in a burst of uncontrollable feeling, "I should think myself the happiest man alive if I were free to offer myself as a suitor for Miss Kent, and to feel that I had the slightest chance of success with her."

Now, that outburst — which caused the listener's heart to warm toward the young man, and strengthened her old liking for him, while it confirmed her in the belief that he really was infatuated with Dorothy—did nothing to disprove Mrs. Alfred's insinuations. For why should he, who had been left in a position of complete independence, and even authority, by his father, find it impossible to marry?

There must be some dark secret or secrets that prevented him from going forward in the direction toward which his inclination visibly pointed.

"What I want to speak to Miss Kent about," said Sebastian, remaining silent just long enough to permit him to resume his ordinary tone, "is a matter wherein I have promised to give her some help, but which it is expedient to keep private for the moment. She has promised, in fact, to show me a photograph which is connected with the case, but which can not have any interest for others than ourselves."

"Mysteries are not to my taste, especially when they exist between two young people who, as we have just agreed, can be nothing to each other. And I may add that, since you can not come forward openly as a suitor for Miss Kent, it is better that you should let her entirely alone. She is not, I am thankful to say, specially impressionable. She has had many admirers, and would be, I believe, less dazzled by the advantages you have to offer than most modern girls. Still, she is young, and the armor of youth is never quite impregnable. Besides, you may do her an injustice by keeping away other and, possibly, more desirable men."

If Sebastian noticed the qualifying phrase he gave no sign. His tone, indeed, was sadly acquiescent.

"I can quite see," he said, "the force of

your reasoning; and I am certain of one thing: that, for my own peace of mind, it is better that I should keep away. But for this one time, as the matter is really of importance, I beg that you will permit this interview."

"Why, of course!" said Mrs. Rollins. "It would be absurd as well as ungracious to do otherwise. Miss Kent is in her room. I will send for her."

Saying which she rose and, after a slight instant of hesitation, held out her hand. Sebastian, though well aware of the malign influence that had been exerted over her, made no attempt to reinstate himself in her good graces. The matter, he knew, was hopeless. Whatever opinion of him had been put into her mind must remain there. He braced his shoulders as if for conflict, resolving to himself that, whatever might befall, he should stand firm. He walked restlessly about the room, mechanically examining the pictures on the wall and the groups of statuary placed at intervals, until he heard, with a sudden thrill and leaping of the heart, a swish of skirts, and knew that Dorothy was coming.

She advanced into the room, in a simple house dress of soft silk, that, in its graceful lines and absence of all decorative trimming, was singularly becoming to her. A small turnover collar seemed to emphasize the slenderness of her throat, above which rose that eager, sympathetic face, and those eyes that had so

singular an attraction for him. She held out her hand frankly.

"I am glad that you have come," she said, "and that Mrs. Rollins has allowed me to see you, especially as I had a letter from that poor, forlorn old creature, who is getting poorer as well as more helpless every day, and who has begun at last to despair of help from any source."

So they sat down together to discuss that matter. Dorothy took possession of a large armchair, which gave a touch of quaintness to her figure; and Sebastian pulled a light wicker one sufficiently near that they might talk in lowered tones. He was thinking how perilous, not for her but for him, would be continued association. The exhilaration, the joyfulness that had come from her presence, the sound of her voice, and the smile upon her lips, brought the fact home to him with peculiar force. Even the vague hint that Mrs. Rollins had thrown out, that he himself and his attentions might not be wholly indifferent to Dorothy, gave an added stimulus to that attraction toward this personality of singular charm. He seemed to realize with an intensity that astonished himself what life might be if he were free from that horrible entanglement, and could, as Mrs. Rollins said, come forward openly as a suitor. He permitted himself to wonder as to the manner in which Dorothy would have received his advances, and whether he could really

have prevailed with her. As for the girl, whatever the thoughts that might be subconsciously, as the phrase is, filling the back of her mind she was chiefly occupied just then with the letter she had received,—a letter which had awakened all the sympathy of her nature, and aroused in her a generous emotion.

“Perhaps,” she said, “I had better let you read this letter, Mr. Wilmot; and then you will see and understand for yourself that I must help this poor creature, if there is any way of doing so; and that it must be done at once. Her little resources are nearly at an end, and what is to become of her then?”

Sebastian took the letter from her hand. It was fairly well written, though in a hand that was loose and rambling, and it extended over several sheets of thin paper. The whole tragedy of a life was there expressed; and, in his present mood of exaltation, which was partly a reflex of that of the girl beside him, it touched him to the quick. All the latent chivalry of his nature was brought to the surface; and, moreover, it had been borne in upon him, even as upon that occasion when he had first heard of Miss Kent’s singular acquaintance, that the poor unfortunate had been curiously linked to his own life, at least by the bond of coincidence. The letter gave the history of the case, as though Dorothy were hearing it for the first time. It told of the early age at which the writer had been deprived of her sole parent

and, so far as she knew, only-living relative. It told of some of the struggles which the dead woman had endured, of her connection with certain theatrical companies remote from New York or from any of the larger centres, where her detection by the man from whom she had fled might be probable; and in such ventures she had never, of course, made use of her own name. The place and circumstances of the mother's death were given in detail, only the date being omitted; since, as the poor woman said, she could not be certain of the year, nor of how old she herself was at the time, because of the confusion in her head, that would not let her think. She had been a very young girl, not yet grown into womanhood, and had been attending school. She spent also an entire page of the letter bemoaning the fact that her mother had become so suddenly unconscious in her last fatal illness that she had not time to tell her, as she might then have consented to do, the name and the whereabouts of that mysterious father, whom she had apparently spent those last years of her life in eluding.

When Sebastian came to the end of this epistle, he saw that it was signed with a single initial—E. He stared at it a moment with a growing excitement.

"You don't mind telling me, I suppose," he said, "what that initial stands for?"

And it required all his self-command not to

betray the shock which he received when Dorothy, who was intent upon the letter that she had taken back into her hand, answered unsuspectingly:

“Elmira.”

Was that name, Sebastian thought, to haunt him and confront him at every turn? And could it be possible that here before his eyes, within his very grasp, was the grim Nemesis that had darkened his father's life, and projected its shadow into his own? This improbability had, indeed, come to pass; and the woman whose fate he had commiserated was precisely that one with whom his father's existence had been bound up. He even forgot for the moment, that this Elmira could not be the one who had probably superadded that rather uncommon cognomen of Elmira to her more plebeian one of Sally. With a start he remembered that if the name were not another mere trick of the enchanter Coincidence, this must be not the woman herself but the daughter. And if that were so, what then? He thrilled from head to foot with the possibility of relief from at least one portion of his anxieties, and from a danger that had seemed ever imminent. For never should Elmira in the flesh appear to substantiate those claims which would have placed his mother and the whole family in so intolerable a position.

With the curious commingling of emotions of which the human heart is susceptible, came

likewise a strong sensation of pity and regret that the Elmira whom he had been seeking, and whom he unconsciously pictured to himself as still the young mill girl of long ago, had died,—died without justice having been done to her, or without receiving any portion of the wealth which she had, it is true, forfeited by her own rash act, but which, nevertheless, was rightfully hers. He could not trust himself to speak; he could not, in the light of that new possibility, think of any form of words in which to continue the conversation with Dorothy. He stared at her helplessly; even her beauty for the time being unnoted, save, perhaps, by some unconsciously soothing and restful influence that it exerted.

“It is a singular name, Elmira,” commented Dorothy. “I don’t think I ever heard it before in real life. Did you?”

“Yes,” said Sebastian, scarcely knowing what he answered, “I have heard it before.”

“It suited the woman,” Dorothy went on; though she was beginning to wonder at the young man’s set face, and the strange expression of the eyes, which were startled as if he had seen a ghost. “It would have been dreadfully out of place if her name had been—well, anything at all.”

She ended rather lamely; for it certainly seemed to her that Sebastian’s manner was peculiar, and that he did not show any of the sympathy that he had offered spontaneously

upon another occasion. It occurred to her, therefore, that she had better not linger over details, but say whatever she had to say, and conclude what might be called the business part of the interview. She thought, with a touch of resentment, that the young man was plainly thinking of something else, and had not been moved, as she believed he would be, by the letter and the story of that strange life.

"I know," she said, "that you are so very busy, and have so many cares of your own that it is not reasonable to expect you to be interested in this poor woman."

"But, indeed, I *am* interested," rejoined Sebastian, with an accent of unmistakable sincerity. "I am more deeply interested than you can imagine, and quite apart from the interest I must take in whatever interests you—"

He stopped; for this, perhaps, was not quite in accordance with his tacit agreement with Mrs. Rollins. After a brief pause he resumed:

"The case is most pitiful,—a most tragic one, and I have already been thinking over all that must be done in the woman's behalf. Of course she must get relief at once. She must, at any cost, be placed beyond the reach of want in future."

He spoke rapidly, feverishly; and Dorothy's heart was touched by these evidences of what she supposed to be merely generous emotion.

"That is so good of you!" she said. "So many people would never give the matter a second thought."

"But I can not take credit for that," said Sebastian, anxious to turn aside praise which he believed to be unmerited. "Indeed I can not. I am simply obliged to help her and to do everything that can be done."

He paused; for even in his excitement he realized that he might be going too far. And, in truth, Dorothy was somewhat puzzled.

"Well," she said, "since you are kind enough to feel that way—"

"And to do her a kind of vicarious justice," he interposed, with a slight laugh.

"I think," said Dorothy, "I had better show you the photograph now. It would probably be the best guide of all for finding out anything; and it might have resulted in something long ago, only that Elmira felt herself bound by the absolute command of her mother not to put the matter into the hands of police or detective. Still, her mother always said that, after her death, if she could not find out in any other way, she would be free to make what appeal she chose to that mysterious father, whose name during her lifetime she would never divulge. But she insisted that she must not, in any event, approach him through the police or make any public scandal."

While Dorothy thus talked, Sebastian was

realizing to the full how much his father had owed to the forbearance of that miserable, undisciplined girl, who, though aware of the wealth and the position he had attained, either from pride or from the consciousness that she had been in the wrong, had endured all things rather than appeal to him for assistance, or trouble the peace of an existence out of which she had voluntarily passed.

Summoning all his energies to meet what he foresaw was coming, Sebastian let his eyes wander round the room, which had the commonplace appearance of one wherein the minor business of life was transacted,—its follies, its pleasures, its conventions. Everything was in order; there was nothing to correspond to the tumultuous disorder of his thoughts. Everything had a smiling appearance of well-being, where so much was awry in the ordering of Sebastian's life; while its stillness, save for their two voices, seemed to cry, "Peace,—peace!" where there was no peace. The brightness coming in at the window seemed discordant. Even the beauty and charm of this girl seemed strangely inharmonious with these new pictures presented to his mind and serving as a complement to those which his father had placed before him,—pictures of wrong done that could never be atoned for, of misery inflicted, and of the peril that had hung suspended by a thread,—the frail thread of a woman's pride and unwillingness to force herself upon one

whom she had given up of her own accord, but who, as she had believed, had very willingly acquiesced in that arrangement.

Meanwhile Dorothy's small head, with its shining, well-brushed tresses, arranged with such absolute neatness that scarcely a tiny ringlet or two escaped upon the white neck, was bending over a parcel which she had brought from upstairs. It was wrapped in many sheets of tissue paper, from which she took forth and held out to Sebastian a photograph. It had never been a specially good one, and now it was faded by the years. As Sebastian stretched forth his hand and took it, there stared at him from the cardboard the lineaments of his father as he had been in youth,—not, indeed, the prosperous and portly merchant whom Sebastian, in the confusion of his thoughts, had half expected to see, but a slender and dark complexioned youth, who bore a slight, indefinable resemblance to himself, which he prayed that Dorothy might not discover. A blessed thing, it seemed to him then, that he was said to resemble his mother, or at least her side of the family.

XVIII.

SEBASTIAN kept his eyes fixed upon the counterfeit presentment,—not daring to withdraw them for fear Dorothy might read in their depths something of what he was feeling; for a very whirl of thought was rushing through his brain. Detection of that cherished secret, exposure and all its consequences, might hang upon that piece of pasteboard; and he had a shuddering realization of what would have happened if Dorothy had shown that photograph to Mrs. Rollins, or if Mrs. Alfred had even so much as heard of its existence.

There was positive relief, too, even triumph, in the feeling that his quest was over,—the weary search which he had been pursuing by means of cautious inquiries, of carefully-worded advertisements, each of which had given him cold chills of apprehension lest it should be answered or read or understood by the prying and the malicious. And there was thankfulness that this damaging witness of the past had not fallen into other hands; and there was a glimmer of hope that out of this chaos might come light. It seemed, perhaps, most singular of all that this certainty had come through the

instrumentality of Dorothy, from whom Sebastian would most have wished to keep all knowledge of the guilty secret.

As he trusted himself at last to look at her, noting the broad brow, the space between the eyes, and the whole expression of the face, denoting kindness and sympathy, he wondered if to her, more than to others, it might not be safe to make, if that were necessary, such a revelation. For if she were yet too young and too ignorant of the world's ways to feel the divinest of all sympathy, pity for the wrongdoer, she might at least be made to comprehend something of the pathetic elements of the situation, even where David Wilmot was concerned.

"I suppose," said Sebastian, in a voice that, to his own surprise, sounded steady, "you have not shown this photograph to any one?"

"I have not shown it even to Mrs. Rollins," Dorothy answered; "though I have told her the story. She never was so much interested in that as I had hoped. She said there were plenty of such cases in every large city, and that it would be like looking for a needle in a haystack to try, after so many years, to find that man without the help of the police. She thought, by the way, that was a very ridiculous condition for the mother to have made,—that the police should not be called in. It made her inclined to doubt the whole story. But I can understand that part of it, can't you?"

"From one point of view, yes," replied Sebastian; "though I don't think many people would look at it just in that way."

"More women than you think would be disposed to do so," said Dorothy. "You see, she had left her husband of her own accord; and, though that did not excuse him, she might have felt a reluctance in going back for the sake of money. Or, if we look for a meaner motive, she might have been afraid that she had somehow put herself into the power of the law, and that a rich man would in any case be able to get the better of her. Mrs. Rollins does not believe that he is wealthy. She thinks that was only a romantic story, the woman invented to tell her daughter."

"Well," said Sebastian, "I am not of Mrs. Rollins' opinion. I believe the story is true. But will you do me, in any case, the favor not to speak much about it, and above all not to show the photograph to any one, especially," he added, with a laugh, "to Mrs. Alfred Wilmot? Otherwise, I should have no peace till she knew everything."

"You may be sure I will not show it," answered Dorothy. "Up to this time, I have kept it in the bottom of my trunk for fear of prying eyes."

"Very well, then," said Sebastian. "It is understood that we keep the secret between us."

"More than that," observed Dorothy, "I

think I will entrust you with the photograph,—only, of course, on condition that you do not let it get into the hands of the police. The wishes of the dead woman, if they *were* overstrained, must be respected.”

“They shall be by me,” promised Sebastian; “and I will take the greatest care of the photograph.”

He betrayed, in fact, almost an undue eagerness to restore the piece of cardboard to its wrappings of tissue paper, and to conceal it in the depths of his pocket. Once there, it seemed to him as if a catastrophe had been averted.

“Now that this matter is in my hands,” he further assured her, “I feel confident that I shall be able to accomplish something. I shall leave no stone unturned to discover the key to this mystery, and to place Elmira’s affairs upon a satisfactory basis.”

“Inspired by your confidence,” said Dorothy, “I think I may venture to write her a hopeful letter.”

“You may do more than that,” rejoined Sebastian, hesitating over each word, since he recognized the delicate position in which he was placed. “On the score of that confidence, you may send her, if you will, a cheque, which shall be paid through you every month until this mystery is cleared up.”

“But,” said Dorothy, “if it should *never* be cleared up?”

Sebastian looked at her with a smile.

"I can not admit such a possibility. With adequate resources at one's command, everything can be accomplished nowadays."

"But," persisted Dorothy, "if everything should *not* be accomplished?"

"Why, then," said the young man, "we can go on hoping until Elmira's death should settle matters in another way."

"Oh, you are too generous, too kind!" cried Dorothy, feeling almost as if his generosity was being extended to herself.

Sebastian eagerly disclaimed this.

"It is not generosity," he said. "Oh, believe me, it is simple justice!"

As she stared at him in wonder, he added:

"The justice, I mean, that society owes to the woman who has been wronged."

"But how shall we explain this matter to her? Shall we have to invent the fiction that the father has been found?"

Sebastian looked at her with a strange smile.

"You and I can persuade ourselves of that," he declared. "I can say to you, and you must believe me, that he has been found."

There was silence in the room,—a silence so deep and prolonged that it seemed almost as if his words echoed through its vastness.

"He has been found," said Sebastian. "He is most deeply penitent for the wrong he did her mother, even though that mother was, in the first instance, to blame. (At least we can

take the word of the dead woman for that.) He is anxious to atone for the past, to rid himself of the burden of remorse that weighed him down; that rose a dark spectre before him everywhere; that he was afraid of transmitting as a curse to his children; that even in death might follow him beyond the grave."

Sebastian was talking rapidly, his breath coming quick, and his face flushed.

"Oh," cried Dorothy, with a little shudder, when his voice at last died away into silence, "what an imagination you must have! I never thought before that you would have made a splendid actor."

"Life itself is chiefly acting," said Sebastian, wiping from his forehead the drops of sweat that were standing there. "I am afraid I have alarmed you in trying to piece out that narrative with which you might have to satisfy your pensioner."

"She will not be mine, but yours," replied Dorothy, quickly.

"Yes, mine; and I fully accept the responsibility for her."

"But," said Dorothy, who had been early trained to uprightness, "I could not write her such a tissue of—invention as that."

"It would be writing her the probabilities of the case," observed Sebastian,—“what did occur, you may be sure, if her mother spoke the truth; and what the man must have felt,

especially when he grew older and nearer the eternal realities."

"I don't believe such a man—I mean a man who could have acted that way—would have any such feelings at all," answered Dorothy, emphatically.

"You would regard him," said Sebastian, with an almost ghastly smile upon his face, "as altogether monstrous and unnatural. But believe me, dear Miss Kent, my version is probably nearer the truth, or will best serve to allay Elmira's suspicions."

In the silence that ensued Dorothy, who had arisen, slowly reseated herself, while Sebastian resumed:

"And, in this man's defence, it must be admitted that Elmira left him."

"Only after a long course of what might be called strained relations, if not actual ill usage," said Dorothy. "The details of all that, we shall never know now. And the man, I am sure, if he had taken the proper measures, and especially if he were rich, could have found her again."

"Is that quite certain?" asked Sebastian, thinking of his own experience.

"It is at least quite probable," rejoined Dorothy.

Now, while they had been talking, Dorothy was aware of a new chain of sympathy that seemed to bind her to Sebastian; though into her mind, too, had come the vague insinuations

which Mrs. Rollins, in her anxiety to warn her against the young man, had repeated; and also the anxiety which Mrs. Alfred had professed to feel that the youngest of the Wilmot brothers had given up the practice of his religion.

"There is one point in that letter," she said rather abruptly, "that I suppose you noticed, and that pleased me very much. It is that poor Elmira has at last done what I so often implored her to do—turned to religion for consolation. During her wandering life after her mother's death, she had become a convert to the Church, but had not kept faithful to its practices. Just lately she told me that she had sent for a priest and gone to confession."

Sebastian made no comment, and Dorothy continued:

"Don't you think that's very fortunate? For, whatever trouble people are in, they only make it worse by neglecting their religion. I would almost rather see any one I cared for dead than doing such a thing."

Her small face glowed with the ardor of the sentiment and the intensity of her feeling; and, though that last sentence had appeared rather irrelevant to the subject of Elmira, it moved Sebastian profoundly.

"If any one were happy enough to know that you cared for him," he said, "he must be swayed by your slightest wish."

There was an intense vibrant pause. Both were keyed up to a pitch of feeling that made

further words difficult, yet urgently necessary to be spoken. Nor did Dorothy notice the fact that Sebastian had used the masculine pronoun, as if it were no longer Elmira but one of his sex that she indicated.

"It would be the first thing I should ask of any one in whom I was interested," said Dorothy,—“to be faithful first of all to God.”

“A man for whom you cared and who loved you,” answered Sebastian (and his voice seemed to ring through the room in the force of the declaration), “would be as wax in your hands.”

“And it would be worth caring for him and a true test of his love,” said the girl, “if for my sake he should go back to God.”

“Only in that way,” agreed Sebastian, “could he make himself worthy of you, and he would sweep out of his path whatever obstacles might come between.”

It was a singular conversation, and it left them both trembling with excitement. Dorothy was the first to recover herself.

“Are we still talking fiction?” she said, with a sweet smile that very nearly caused Sebastian to forget everything and to break forth into the declaration that trembled upon his lips. For he was asking himself in a tumult of joy, if the words that she had spoken could have meant anything except an appeal to him to do that which would please her best of all. Never had the chain of silence galled as at that moment. But he answered her question in a

tone that was perfectly light, and as devoid of feeling as he could make it:

"It is a fiction that you and I must hold for truth, since truth and fiction are often singularly interwoven."

There was a pause, during which Dorothy was gaining the mastery over the emotion that had possessed her, and likewise perhaps reproaching herself that in her religious zeal she had gone too far.

"Mrs. Rollins says," she remarked, "that I am always putting unnecessary enthusiasm into my statement of facts."

"Enthusiasm is the leaven that lights our dull monotony," observed Sebastian, glad to find himself safe back in generalities, and yet with a longing to let her know that he understood and valued all that she had implied: "If women always felt as you do," he said, "they would cement their friendships with the other sex, and make their love indestructible."

"I am afraid they would not always be able to accomplish that," replied Dorothy, with something that was half wistful in her expression. "In fact, it often seems as if those who turn away from all such things have the strongest influence."

"Never believe it!" cried Sebastian. "While there is a spark of chivalry remaining, and unless a man be wholly debased, what is best must always most strongly support other attractions."

"Of course it would be the ideal way," said Dorothy, thoughtfully; "and I suppose it does sometimes happen."

It was on Sebastian's lips to say that it must often have happened in her case, but he refrained; and Dorothy went on:

"How curiously we have strayed from the subject of Elmira!"

The words recalled Sebastian more forcibly than anything else could have done to the perils of untoward complications in which he had placed himself, and reminded him how treacherous were these meadows of living green into which he had permitted his feet to wander.

"Yes, we have strayed," he assented,—seeing the necessity of abandoning that dangerous ground, and yet the absolute impossibility of continuing the conversation on trivial subjects after the climax which had been reached and passed between them.

"On due consideration," he began again in an ordinary tone, taking a notebook from his pocket, "I will make out the cheque to Elmira herself instead of to you."

"Yes, that will be better," acquiesced Dorothy, still a little breathless from her late emotion.

"If you will give me her full name?"

This Dorothy did, with little suspicion that, since it was the mother's maiden name, Sebastian was already familiar with it from his father's papers.

"You can tell her," said Sebastian, laughingly, "that I am not the man himself, but am acting as his agent."

"I hope no improbability will strike her in our narrative," observed Dorothy, with a troubled face; "though I think not, for she was so fully persuaded that the truth must come to light that she will be ready to believe anything."

"We shall not make the sums too large at first," said Sebastian; "but we can go on increasing them till I shall feel that I am carrying out the wishes of this man, whom I can not consent to consider a monster, and whom I feel sure I shall discover."

He came to a sudden resolution, while Dorothy's eyes were fixed upon him.

"I may as well tell you what I meant at first to keep secret; that, from the facts with which you previously supplied me, I am almost certain of being upon his track already."

Dorothy's glance became penetrating as she asked:

"Is that truth or fiction?"

His eyes met her own fearlessly, while he declared so solemnly that she could not choose but believe him:

"It is the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. But, oh, you will see yourself how greater than ever is the need of secrecy! For, by the least imprudence, such ruin and unhappiness would be brought to many persons

as you can scarcely imagine. With the further information that I have received to-day, I shall be able to assure myself that my hopes are realized; but the slightest indiscretion would be disastrous."

"You may trust me,—you may trust me entirely!" cried Dorothy, joyfully. Her last doubts and fears were removed by this avowal, which she accepted without suspicion, and which seemed, moreover, to account for any strangeness in Sebastian's manner. "I would rather die than bring such trouble upon others, or cause you to regret your generous interest in Elmira. I will ask you no more questions, and the subject shall never be mentioned between us, unless by yourself."

"It is a subject that will not bear discussion," Sebastian assured her gravely.

There seemed nothing more that could be said; and, though the temptation was strong to linger, he rose to his feet.

"I fear," he declared, "that Mrs. Rollins will feel that I am abusing the kind permission she has given me, and overstaying all decent bounds."

Dorothy followed him to the threshold of the drawing-room and stood framed in its arched door; while Sebastian took his hat from where the servant had placed it, and drew on a pair of gloves.

"I hope," said the girl, and her tone was very grave and quiet, "that you will not

agree with Mrs. Rollins in thinking me too frank and too emphatic in the statement of my opinions."

"I will think," he answered slowly, "how your words may be applied even to those who are happy in being on the mere outskirts of your friendship."

Saying which he passed out on to the thoroughfare, where Fashion was in full swing at that hour, and where he met and returned mechanically the salutations of at least a score of acquaintances. For his thoughts, varied and tumultuous as they had been that afternoon, were dominated just then by the remembrance of Dorothy as she had appeared at that last moment, framed in the dark arch of the door, and uttering her gravely spoken apology for something which had filled him with deepest joy. Never had she appealed to him with a stronger or more subtle force than at that last moment.

XIX.

GREAT was Sebastian's relief at the certainty that had come to him. He seemed at last to stand upon solid earth instead of upon the marsh lands of suspense. The spectre which he had often evoked—a woman appearing at some time to claim what was hers, and to make public perhaps what he had labored so hard to keep secret—was laid forever. But the pathos of the story sank deep into his sensitive nature, all the more that she had faded away, so far as this life was concerned, into the ultimate darkness, without asserting any claim. He was, in consequence, still more anxious to do justice to the living daughter and to put her into immediate possession of whatever was hers.

Here, however, the utmost discretion had to be used. He had not realized how difficult it would be; for, as much as possible, his own personality had to be kept in the background in all the necessary business formalities. He had simplified things, in one direction, by explaining to Dorothy, and through her to Elmira, that the unknown father had been found, but that for that very reason the utmost

secrecy was imperative. Such an explanation could not, of course, be given to lawyers and bankers by whom the affair had to be transacted. Still, it would have to be done; and, in the eyes of the discreet old lawyer to whom he had resolved to entrust the case, the woman would have to pass as a relative of his father, whom, it was not advisable or necessary to bring to the notice of the rest of the family. If the shrewd man of affairs suspected anything further,—well, lawyers as a class are able to hold their tongues. The work of their offices brings to life every day the dry bones of the dead, and the skeletons by which families are haunted, and clothes them with a sinister vitality. The chief danger, however, was the prying of Alfred and of his wife, whose inquisitiveness and malice lent her a hundred eyes.

It pleased the young man to think, amongst minor things, that he would now be in a position to gratify his mother's long-expressed desire to get rid of the house; only he did not want to be premature, and appear to change his mind too suddenly; so he thought it better to leave that matter in abeyance while the others were being transacted. For his consent to the sale of the house would bring into play the full battery of Mrs. Alfred's curiosity. But the discovery of the first Elmira's death and of the identity of her daughter left Sebastian, in other respects, precisely where he had

been. The secrecy imposed upon him became more binding, now that the sin of his father had taken a concrete form, and that one Elmira at least had come forth from the region of shadows to that of definite reality.

While Sebastian was thus busier than ever with those secret and delicate negotiations, Margie had striven to remove from his mind every trace of the unpleasantness that had marred their last interview. He met her one afternoon, very soon after that memorable visit to Dorothy. She was walking up the street near their house, in a new costume and toque of brown that made her, he thought, exceedingly pretty. He was coming, as he had punctually done for years, homeward at that hour "when daylight melts." It had become his custom since his father's death to walk all the way home, instead of availing himself of any of the public conveyances. And it was a significant but characteristic fact that he never could persuade himself, no matter how bad the weather might be, to make use of the carriage and drive home as he had done on that last momentous day with his father. The iron of that tragical happening and its after effects had entered too deeply into his soul.

Margie, hastening forward, linked her arm in his affectionately.

"If you are not too tired, Sebastian," she said, "we will come into the Park and walk a little. I want to tell you something."

He agreed, nothing loath; though the trees there were bare, and such of their leaves as had not been swept from the path lingered at intervals, like distressful reminders,—the memories that cling even about little things, and arise to dog the footsteps at every turn. There was a chilly wind sweeping about; and the grass, dry and sere, remained mournfully fixed to its place, like lives that have lost all their attractiveness.

“Now,” said Margie, shivering a little, and with her disengaged hand turning up the collar of her coat, “I just want to say a word to you about—what we were talking over the other day.”

“About Dr. Dever?” he said, smiling down upon her.

“Yes,” she answered. “And I may as well begin by saying that I can not give him up. I have decided, and I have told him so.”

Sebastian suppressed a sigh. For what could he say in answer to such a statement? And what, after all, could he do? If Margie persisted in her very natural wish to secure her own happiness (and the remembrance of Dorothy enabled him fully to understand that wish), the alternative would lie between that silence being broken or permitting Gerald to marry without being informed of how matters really stood. He reflected that possibly the latter alternative might be the better, now that there was no longer any danger of a public

scandal; and yet his own ideas, overstrained though they might be, pointed in the former direction.

"It would be very absurd, too, to give him up without a reason," Margie went on.

"Unhappily," said Sebastian, "there *is* a reason. But perhaps, before we discuss that further, you had better say all that you intended to say."

"Well, it is this. Gerald has promised to wait a whole year, in the hope of gaining your consent."

"Margie," cried Sebastian, "my dear, dear little Margie, do you think for one instant that the matter depends merely on my consent? Why, you ought to know that I would do anything on earth to make you happy."

He spoke with a kind of desperation; for what likelihood was there that even this sister, who had always been so closely bound to him, could understand?

"I know that, Sebastian," Margie replied; "and I feel perfectly sure that you have a good reason for your opposition; though, of course, it is hard to see what it can be."

"I feel bound to tell you," said Sebastian, "that, glad as I may be of the respite, I do not see that matters will be any different a year hence."

Margie looked at him for a moment in dismay.

"Well, what shall we do, then?" she exclaimed,—*"I mean Gerald and I?"*

"I don't know," replied Sebastian, and his tone of weary despondency touched Margie more deeply than any argument he could have used. A few stray leaves went whirling past them; the sombre sky of late autumn was above their heads; there was a menace of coming winter in the whole atmosphere.

"Sebastian," said Margie, after a pause, "wouldn't it be better to trust me entirely,—to open your whole mind to me? I am not a child now, and I could judge for myself."

"That would be the better way, of course," said Sebastian, "if only it could be done."

She thought he was talking very strangely; for common-sense was one of the strongest attributes of this girl, who was now divided between the love for her brother and respect for his opinion, that had become second nature, and that new and strong affection which had been growing and strengthening for many months.

"Sebastian," she said, "if there is really anything in all this—and of course there must be, since you say so,—then, if you can not trust me, you should trust some one, and I will tell you whom."

He knew what she was going to say before the words had formed themselves on her lips.

"You remember that dear old priest who came to tell us the good news about father? Well, he is the one. You can trust him entirely,

even outside of confession. And think what an adviser he would make!"

Now, this very resolution had been forming itself in the young man's mind, particularly since the words that Rosanna had spoken, and the talk which he had had with Dorothy Kent. The expressions that she had used, the wishes she had uttered, whether he might dare to apply them to himself or not, were to be respected as commands.

"Perhaps I should not speak of this," said Margie, thus lending her weight to those strong influences that were impelling him toward that decision. "But scarcely anything ever made me feel so bad as I felt when I found out, only lately, that you had given up going to church, just like—"

He knew it was on her lips to say "just like poor father." But she restrained herself, as if she would not thus utter condemnation of the dead.

"For you know very well, Sebastian," she went on, "that that is the greatest misfortune that can possibly happen to any one."

Sebastian was silent, feeling the truth of her words into the very depths of his soul. For never had he realized what the sustaining power of religion might be more fully than when he had cast it aside.

"You won't mind my saying this to you, dear?" observed Margie.

The young man put his hand gently upon

the small gloved one of his sister that rested upon his arm.

"You may be sure, Margie," he replied, "that I don't mind anything you feel inclined to say to me. And in this case I know only too well that you are perfectly right."

"You see," continued Margie, thus encouraged, "everyone that is interested in you must feel the same,—mother of course (though I don't think she knows), Rosanna, myself, and—Dorothy Kent."

A swift flush rose to Sebastian's face and mounted to his very hair.

"For she *is* interested in you, I don't care what any one says; and I know that, though she couldn't speak to you, she thinks it just heartbreaking that you should give up your religion."

"Margie, Margie," cried Sebastian in a hoarse voice, "don't tell me these things! Don't tell me anything she may have said. I have no right to hear it."

"You have a right to hear what is for your good," said Margie, decidedly; "and it distressed Dorothy ever so much when that wretched Mrs. Alfred went and told her. So since then we are all banded together against you in this; and the three of us—Rosanna and she and I—are praying very hard."

"Praying for me!" said Sebastian, almost awestricken. "God knows I need prayers."

But it gave him a delicious thrill of joy to

think that Dorothy had joined the league of those who, with the exception of his mother, loved him best of all. The fact was significant, and it filled him for the moment with such happiness that it was hard for him to steady himself and to speak in an ordinary tone.

"Well," he remarked, "I think I must do something toward the success of this league that has been formed, and to show the efficacy of prayers from such sources."

His tone was half jesting, but the concession made Margie's eyes sparkle with joy.

"I set Gerald Dever praying, too," she said, with a natural desire to bring the Doctor within this charmed circle of the affections; "only, of course, I did not tell him the object of our prayers. He was as enthusiastic about it as some men might be about sport. And he is such a splendid Catholic, taking the Church and its interests really to heart as if they were his own! Oh, you will like him, Sebastian, when you get to know him, and when everything comes right!"

"When he shall have ceased to think of me as the ogre. But I am sure, as you say, I shall like him; for I could trust your judgment, Margie. You would never be satisfied with an inferior article."

"I haven't made any mistake in Gerald," the girl said earnestly; "and it will be a great thing to marry a man of whom I can always feel proud."

"Yes, that would be a great thing, Margie," agreed Sebastian.

They walked nearly half round the enclosure before Sebastian spoke again.

"Seriously, Margie, it must have been all those prayers you were saying for me that have constantly impelled me of late to go to see that priest, and at least have a long talk with him."

"O you dear Sebastian!" cried Margie, stopping and looking up into his face. "Then you will make us all so happy!"

"I shall dispense happiness easily then, like a grand monarch," he said, laughing; "though I seem powerless to do it in other ways. And, after all, my conversion may not be so difficult a matter. For, though I now realize fully how terrible a thing it was for me to give up my religious duties for any reason whatever, in other ways I have not strayed so far."

"That's what I was saying to Dorothy—that, except in the one thing, which happened only lately, you were the best, the most—"

"Come, come!" cried Sebastian. "You mustn't canonize me before I have even been converted."

But he could not repress a feeling of gratification at the thought of how this warm-hearted little advocate had argued his cause with Dorothy.

"And I should just like," went on Margie, "when you have been 'converted,' as you say,

not to tell Mrs. Alfred a word about it, but to let her go round pulling a long face and making a dote of herself."

Sebastian gave the first hearty laugh that he had indulged in for many a day, and one that sounded perfectly natural on his lips.

"Hurrah for Margie when she goes on the warpath!" he said. "She's a splendid fighter, and convinces us that she's not quite ready to take wings yet."

"I know it is uncharitable," admitted Margie,—"downright wicked, perhaps. But she makes me feel that way every day, and especially where you are concerned."

"Don't mind her," said Sebastian. "The most malicious people only do harm to themselves in the end."

For he was thinking that when a dagger has pierced one's heart one takes but little heed of the stings of a wasp. Indeed, he was greatly comforted by what Margie had told him, and also by the determination, which he had been slowly forming, to emerge from the outer dreariness into the circle of light which she had indicated. He began to realize that his fear of what the priest might advise was only the phantom of a mind that had been suffering from the abnormal strain put upon it, and that his best chance of peace and happiness could come from the influence of religion.

That evening he was comparatively happy,

and more cheerful than he had felt for a long time; though he was busied until a late hour with the arrangements he was making for Elmira. He had done a good deal of that particular business in the seclusion of home; and had held interviews with his lawyer, and the notary by him chosen, in that selfsame room, where he had learned his father's secret and agonized on that awful night following his death. This was done to shield the matter from Alfred's impertinent curiosity. For he knew that, despite his remonstrances, it was still his elder brother's habit to ask all sorts of questions from the clerks and others in his employ, with regard to himself, his personal habits, and his proceedings. He also visited for this purpose such lawyers and notaries as Sebastian had dealings with, and put them through a regular catechism.

It was fortunate that in the matter of Elmira his father had tried to simplify everything as much as possible, having put aside a sum of money and certain properties, to be used in her behalf by his younger son, Sebastian. And, as previously stated, he had left the house in Gramercy Park as a kind of security for the whole, until all her claim should be satisfied. And he had chosen to employ that selfsame lawyer whom Sebastian, left to himself, had selected, and who was totally separate from those other legal functionaries who did business for the firm. This man could be

trusted to withstand Alfred and to take satisfaction in mystifying and baffling him.

When Alfred had become aware of this gentleman's visits to the house, through the accidental circumstance of meeting him on the stairs, he never rested until he had put him through a series of inquiries as to why Sebastian should have dealings with him when he was not the lawyer of the firm. The latter had shrewdly remarked that Wilmot & Co. was not the only firm in New York, and had given the inquirer to understand that he was acting in the interests of one of those other firms with which Sebastian had amalgamated. And this, Alfred, by further probing and by a visit to the firm in question, had discovered to be true.

"He's up to some mischief," Alfred remarked to his wife; "for lawyers do not go to business men's houses unless there is something unusual."

"Keep your ears and eyes open, then," answered his wife. "If he's plotting anything new against us, we'll find it out somehow or other."

XX.

FORTUNATELY, Mrs. Wilmot had relented toward her younger son to the extent that she spoke to him, much as usual, upon all ordinary affairs, and accepted the unobtrusive and kindly attentions which he showered upon her. In fact, she was not a person to bear malice very long. Naturally cheerful, emotional, and easy-going, it made her uncomfortable to be upon strained terms with any of those about her; so that affairs soon drifted back to something of their old status, in so far as surface conditions were concerned. But the deep wells of love and confidence once rudely disturbed are not so easily restored to their former placidity.

The son had never ceased to love his mother, since the affection for her had always been one of the deepest springs of his nature; but it was in a manner altogether different. The old, trusting, enthusiastic fondness had given place to something subdued, something cautious,—afraid to draw too near, lest full confidence might be invited or unrestricted concessions demanded.

As for Mrs. Wilmot, the natural grief that she had felt at her husband's death had gradu-

ally faded almost entirely away. It could not long find an abiding place in one of her temperament. She hated gloom, and was sincerely glad when its outward symbols could be gradually eliminated from the house and from her attire. She was as keen as ever in her enjoyment of society, taking an almost childish interest in all that appertained thereto. To her, all the mysteries of the dressmaker and milliner were sacred; and she could become as entirely absorbed in a new fashion, the material or design of a costume, the adjustment of a feather or an aigrette in her head-gear, as in the political destinies of a nation. Not that she was wholly frivolous. She was fond of a certain kind of reading, in which she sometimes showed both taste and discrimination. She had her serious moments, too, when religion seemed really to have a hold upon her, and when she deplored her own weakness and a certain laxity that had crept into the household. She was, in the main, an amiable character, and it was through some of her best traits that a malign influence had been able to reach her.

She was looking especially well on a certain November evening when Alfred and his wife and Louis had been dining at home, thus completing the family party. Soon after the meal had been concluded, Sebastian left with Margie, whom he was taking to the theatre, to see a certain great actor in a Shakespearean

recital. It must be owned that both felt a certain relief in being spared a long evening under Mrs. Alfred's penetrating eyes and perpetual smile, together with the pompous dulness of brother Alfred.

The talk stretched onward rather drearily after they had gone. Alfred was giving his mother a verbose account of some happening at the court, during which Louis beat an impatient tattoo upon the table; and Mrs. Alfred, who never listened to her husband's stories, observed him.

"Well, that is wonderful, Alfred!" said the mother. "And to think that you could manage such an affair yourself without any outside help!"

At these words there was an ironical look upon Louis' face, which Mrs. Alfred both saw and understood.

"Oh," said Alfred, waving his hand in deprecation, "such things are the common-places of the law! We meet with them every day. We deal with them as they come to us. Their details are usually of trifling importance."

"All except the fees," put in Louis, "which are never what might be called trifling."

"Well, no,—well, no," stammered Alfred, laughing his peculiarly fatuous laugh, which was always exasperating to Louis,—unreasonably, too, since it was something beyond his brother's control. "The fees, as you justly

observe, are not trifling. But, then, they do not come out of a legal man's pocket."

"No: they generally reverse that proceeding," said Louis. "And half the time a little common-sense would have settled the matter without any fees at all."

"My dear brother, that is a mistake often made by laymen,—I mean those outside of the legal fraternity. They do not take account of the subtleties of the law—"

"Until they get the bill," said Louis.

"Don't medical men ever send bills?" put in Mrs. Alfred, very sweetly, as she turned to him.

"To be sure they do,—good, rousing ones, too; and very often they also might be saved by common-sense. I wish it were sold by the ounce, it is so rare and so precious."

"But wouldn't *you* lose money then, my dear, impatient Doctor?" said Mrs. Alfred.

"And save our tempers. Mine is getting quite worn out."

"Like our poor Sebastian's."

"Oh, Sebastian's," declared Louis, "is proof against anything, or he would have been in the madhouse long ago!"

There was silence after that, until Mrs. Wilmot, probably with a view to change the subject, observed:

"Isn't that friend of Margie's, that Miss Kent, a very pretty girl?"

"So Sebastian thinks," answered Mrs. Alfred. "Doesn't he, Louis?"

"Well, he has not told me so," said Louis.

"If Mrs. Rollins had daughters," continued Mrs. Alfred, looking down demurely, "she would never have had so pretty a companion."

"Oh, is she a companion?" asked Mrs. Wilmot. "I thought she was with Mrs. Rollins as a friend."

"So she is," remarked Louis,—“the daughter of old family friends.”

"She combines both," said Mrs. Alfred, sweetly.

"She's a remarkably beautiful girl," put in Alfred; "and my wife here knows that I have an eye for beauty."

"It must have been closed when you chose her!" thought Louis; but, of course, he said nothing aloud. And, after all, that was probably prejudice; for Mrs. Alfred, in her youth, had been really good-looking.

Mrs. Wilmot was meanwhile pondering what she had heard, and especially one remark which she had found disturbing. It gave her a painful sensation at the heart to think that Sebastian, as Mrs. Alfred had implied, was evidently so much attracted by this young girl as to have excited notice. The youngest son had been so exclusively hers and Margie's, and had been so absorbed in business affairs, that, although he had always loudly proclaimed himself a worshipper of beauty, it

had seemed to the mother that he might not think of marriage for years to come. And, then, a companion, however pretty and attractive, was not at all what the ambitious lady would have chosen for her son. Even Alfred had done better than that,—Caroline having had some money of her own, and having come of a rather distinguished family.

It had been Mrs. Wilmot's dream that Sebastian should ally his wealth with something substantial in the way of family connections, especially as his father had chosen to make him the practical head of the family. She was the more disturbed that she was still agitated over the affair of Margie. For, as Mrs. Alfred suggested, no matter how promising Dr. Dever might be as a physician, he was assuredly "nothing at all to begin with"; and, so far as was known to that genealogically well-informed person, he had no connections that could be at all desirable. This was a subject that had once been tried with Louis, and found to be nearly as explosive as nitroglycerine. On the present occasion, therefore, it was carefully avoided; and, indeed, Mrs. Wilmot could only be thankful that, for some inexplicable reason, with which she thought Sebastian was connected, Margie's affair had been permitted to lapse for the present, and the physician had consented to remain in the obscurity to which Mrs. Alfred had consigned him.

"Our children are a great care to us," said

Mrs. Wilmot, with a sigh, and as a result of these reflections that had been going on in her own mind; "and just as much so when they are grown up as before."

"Not Alfred, surely, my dear mother!" said Louis; and even in his irony, when directed toward his mother, the Doctor showed a kindly tolerance for her weaknesses.

Mrs. Alfred bit her lip, and the mother looked inquiringly at the speaker. Being by no means slow-witted, she partly caught his meaning; but she answered in good faith:

"I have never been anxious about Alfred."

"He follows the straight line, never going off at a tangent, matrimonially or otherwise," said Louis. "Alfred, you are to be congratulated."

Alfred received both his mother's remark and these congratulations quite complacently.

"The law has a steadying influence," he observed. "It gives one balance and weight."

"It is certainly giving you weight," Louis declared. "I'd advise a course of gymnastics."

"Yes, I tell him," interjected Mrs. Alfred, "that he should get Sebastian's recipe for keeping thin."

"Sebastian could give recipes for a good many things," said Louis. "I should like to take several leaves out of his book."

Mrs. Alfred dropped her eyes and looked provokingly, as if that were a subject upon

which she would not touch, especially before a mother.

“And,” assented Alfred, “he is really doing better than might have been expected with the business,—though with the help, of course, that I have been able to give him.”

That was too much for Louis, who rose to his feet, and broke up the party by kissing his mother and wishing the others a curt good-night.

XXI.

WHEN Dr. Louis Wilmot settled himself for his smoke next evening, Rosanna suddenly appeared upon the threshold, and Louis realized that she wanted to speak to him.

"That was a capital dinner," he said, by way of opening the conversation. "And I tell you what, Rosanna, I was hungry!"

"Small blame to you!" she responded, "when you never broke your fast in the middle of the day at all."

"I hadn't—time," said Louis. "The whole town—at least this quarter of it—seems to be down with real or imaginary ailments."

"Half of them do be imaginary, I'm thinking," declared Rosanna; "and most of the time it would be easy for people to physic themselves, as in the olden days."

"Or, better still, throw physic to the dogs," assented Louis.

"True for you, Mr. Louis," agreed Rosanna, absently; after which she began upon the topic that was uppermost in her thoughts. "Do you know that it's been on my mind this good while back to say something to you?"

"I lend you my ears," answered the Doctor,

not without a regretful glance at a particularly interesting item in the paper.

She leaned her hands impressively on the side of the table opposite to where Louis sat, preliminary to beginning; and the Doctor remarked:

"Sit down, Rosanna. You have been on your feet all day."

Without protest, Rosanna accepted the invitation, which her old-fashioned ideas of the properties would not have permitted her to take for granted.

"What I wanted to speak of," she began, "was the lot of quare talk that's been going about Mr. Sebastian."

Louis glanced at her sharply, then lowered his eyes till they rested upon the table cover, while he exclaimed:

"The worst of all plagues was the plague of tongues!"

"You're right enough there, Doctor dear," assented Rosanna. "But I want to tell you there's talk going on over yonder that I don't like. And, as well as I can make out, it comes from the young Madam."

"Humph!" said Louis.

"I'm afeard that the same Madam—bad scran to her!—didn't keep it within the four walls of the house. There's talk gone abroad."

"But what can they possibly say about Sebastian?" asked Louis. "And what harm can this idle chatter do him?"

"Ah, then, Mr. Louis, I wonder at you,—indeed now I do!" cried Rosanna. "Knowledgeable and all as you are, and having lived so long in the world, to ask what harm can be done by poisonous tongues!"

"Well, so long as they are dealing with what is manifestly false?" said Louis, qualifying his first statement. His tone was half interrogative; and, though Rosanna sighed, she answered sharply enough:

"To be sure it's false, every word of it."

"But what is the nature of this talk?" asked Louis, who, always direct, disliked anything like circumlocution.

"Well, 'tis said that he bamboozled his poor father—the Lord rest his soul!—so that he might have the more money to spend on his own evil doings; that he's putting money aside out of the estate, and he won't give an account of it to man or mortal."

"Good Heavens!" cried Louis, springing to his feet. "They never dared—they could not bring such allegations against a man of blameless life! No one would believe such charges."

"Well, it seems that some do believe the talk and some do not. But," added Rosanna, brushing aside the tears that had forced themselves from her faithful, overcharged heart, "the poor lamb gave them just one loophole."

"A loophole! What loophole?" asked Louis, angrily.

"Just this much," said Rosanna: "he began

soon after his poor father's death to stay away from the church and from his duty."

"Pshaw!" said Louis, poking the fire vigorously as a relief to his feelings. "As if in Sebastian's case that could be construed into anything worse than the carelessness that has overtaken many a busy man! And the worst of it is that there's nothing to be done. We can't go round denying the talk. We can't bring any one to book,—though, if I had my way, I'd make it a States prison offence to calumniate a person; and I'd send some one I know up for a long term."

Rosanna laughed grimly.

"Well, as I was saying," she went on, "the stories have gone from bad to worse; and they first reached the servants by a quarrel between Mr. Alfred and his wife. And out of that came a name that's bandied back and forth a good deal; and that's the outlandish name of Elmira."

"Elmira!" repeated Louis, with a flash of intelligence; remembering how Mrs. Alfred, in the communication she had thought fit to make to him, had mentioned that name.

"Yes, Elmira," said Rosanna; "and part of the talk that's going round is, 'Who's Elmira?' Did you ever hear tell of one of that name, Mr. Louis?"

"I heard the name mentioned once by Mrs. Alfred," replied Louis, bluntly; "but it's my belief that such a person never existed."

"She did *that*," was the old woman's startling rejoinder.

"What!" cried Louis, turning upon her. "You believe this nonsense that is being talked?"

"God forbid I'd believe a word of it where our poor lamb is concerned! But there *was* such a person as Elmira; though, between you and me, she was a living woman before Mr. Sebastian was born."

Louis stared at her for a moment, until the meaning of this assertion had dawned upon him; then he burst into a hearty laugh.

"That removes her from the danger zone," he said.

Rosanna sighed again.

"I'm not so easy in my mind about that," she said. "The story, once it's started, will stick to Mr. Sebastian; and he's not one to go around giving the lie to what's said again him."

"He could not very well do that," commented Louis, "unless he engaged a lecture platform."

The Doctor was disposed now to believe that the whole thing was a mare's-nest and a fit subject for jest. Nevertheless, he asked presently:

"How did you—how did any one come to have knowledge of this Elmira?"

"That's what I'm going to tell you; though

of course my story has to do only with my own knowledge of the business."

Louis threw himself again into the chair that he had vacated, and prepared to listen, now with an interest stimulated by his curiosity concerning the mysterious personage.

"My story," began Rosanna, "goes back a good many years. It was when you were a wee, toddling lad, and before Mr. Sebastian was born. I was a slip of a girl, not long in this country. Your mother wanted me to be a kind of helper in the nursery; though I soon got to be your nurse entirely, by reason of Mr. Alfred getting scarlet fever and being taken away by the head nurse to the hospital. But sure you don't remember a word of what I'm telling you."

"Only from hearsay," answered Louis.

"Well, one day, afore I had the full charge of you, I was sent in to sweep out your father's room,—the room where he kept all his papers."

Louis slightly started at the mention of his father.

"I was bid to be very careful, for fear of mislaying anything; and so I was stepping about as if I was on eggshells. Suddenly I stopped in the middle of my sweeping to pick up the weeniest bit of paper, when what did I find foreinst me, lying on the floor, close to the table, but two photographs! It looked as if they might have fallen out of a book or envelope. I picked them up innocent like, and

there was your papa taken by the side of a young woman,—a pretty creature she was, too. And there was the same girl—she couldn't be more than eighteen or nineteen years of age—taken all alone by herself. Underneath that second picture I had spelled out what was there in a quare kind of writing, as if the letters were all jumbled together: 'To David, with ever so much love.' And then sure enough, she put her name."

During this recital Louis sat staring at the floor, with a frown of deep thought between his eyes.

"I needn't ask what the name was," he said at last.

"No, you needn't. It was, of course, Elmira, or I wouldn't be telling you this long story."

Louis, who had allowed his cigar to smoulder to a faint spark, now blew it into life, and began to smoke vigorously.

"I suppose," he said, "there was no date to this thing?"

"Sorra one," declared Rosanna.

"I suppose," went on Louis, after a moment's silence, "it was some boy-and-girl love affair of my late father. But how in the name of wonder this story got foisted onto Sebastian, so that he is made the hero of the drama, is what I can't make out."

"It's the selfsame thing that's puzzling me," Rosanna said; "and it's enough to rack the brains of Brian Boru himself,—him that they

say was so knowledgeable. But to go on with my story. I never in the world would have given a thought to the photographs again only that just as I was holding them in my hands the door opened—you mind the door that leads from your father's bedroom into the place I'm speaking of—and there stood your papa, white as a sheet and all of a tremble. When he seen the photographs in my hand, he flew at me like a bear. I thought he was going to murder me. He snatched the bits of things from my hand and he'd like to have torn them in two.

“‘How dare you,’ says he, ‘go rummaging among my things? And how did you come to be in this room at all?’

“‘Well, Mr. Louis, if you'll believe me, every drop of blood in my body rushed to my face, and I began to shake like one that had the palsy.

“‘I was sent here, sir,’ says I, ‘to sweep and dust and put things in order.’

“‘Who dared to send you?’ says he.

“‘I named the upper housemaid.

“‘She shall leave the house this very day!’ he cried, furious like. ‘And you'll go, too. I'll send you both off, bag and baggage.’

“‘Well, with that, Mr. Louis, I got up my courage and I says to him:

“‘Mr. Wilmot, it's hard on a poor girl that is trying to do her duty, and for the other girl, too, to be ordered out of the house, as if we were criminals.’

“‘You’re worse than a criminal,’ says he.

“‘If you’ll please to tell me how, sir,’ says I. ‘Just because I found on the floor of the room some photographs, and—’

“‘Hush!’ says he. ‘Don’t you dare to mention them!’

“‘And that I thought it no harm to look at them,’ says I. ‘For how was I to know more than the child unborn that they were not to be looked at?’

“He calmed down a good deal at that.

“‘My good girl,’ says he, forcing a smile on him, ‘I think your name is Rosanna.’

“‘Yes, sir, it is,’ says I, dropping a curtsy.

“‘Well, I begin to think you were not so much to blame. You were simply doing your duty, and—and betrayed by a very natural curiosity into looking at these things. I should have been more careful of these photographs, which dropped out of my letter case, and you mustn’t mind what I have said, nor think of leaving the house. Nor need you say anything to the other girl.’”

Louis’ face was still inscrutable, but his mind was considerably disturbed; while Rosanna, after a glance at him, pursued her narrative.

“I promised him that gladly enough; and then he bound me over to keep the matter of the two photographs a secret. He put his hand into his pocket and drew out a bill. How

much it was I don't know, for I never looked at it.

“‘No, sir!’ says I. ‘Many thanks to you! I’m a poor girl, but I won’t take any money for keeping silent about matters that don’t concern me, and that it’s your wish shouldn’t be spoken of.’”

“‘You’re right,’ says he; and then he laughed again, that same death’s-head kind of a laugh. ‘For you’ll know yourself some of these days, Rosanna, when you have a husband of your own, that a wife doesn’t like to hear any such little secrets.’”

“The saying often came back to my mind afterward, though my husband lived only two years,—God have mercy on them all! After his death I went back again to your mamma. For, you see, that was the only place where I had ever lived out in this country.”

Louis had been looking very grave during the latter part of Rosanna’s strange narrative. For he felt perfectly convinced that men, and especially heavy, phlegmatic men like his father, even allowing for the difference between youth and age, do not fly into paroxysms of rage and fear, and do not try to buy their servants’ silence, because of a simple boy-and-girl affair, which a wife would regard as a jest. Besides, many things had puzzled him in Sebastian’s proceedings, though he had resolutely striven to avoid showing any curiosity. And he had been impressed more than he would have cared

to own by the reticence in which his younger brother took refuge whenever the affairs of his late father were mentioned. Whether or not there could be any connection between all that and this singular reminiscence of Rosanna's was a question that now forced itself upon his mind.

"Well, Mr. Louis," said the old woman, "what would you make of that?"

Louis answered in all sincerity:

"I don't know."

"At the time I didn't think much of it," continued Rosanna; "for what would a slip of a girl know about such things? But it's been in my thoughts this while back,—ever since I heard the name of Elmira. I'm telling *you* now, Mr. Louis, what never crossed my lips to man or mortal, and never would if it hadn't been for what's come and gone about the house. And, I ask you, how did that name come in any one's mouth? That's what I'm racking my brains to find out. And it's my belief that the young Madam got wind of that matter somehow."

"It certainly looks like it," said Louis, thoughtfully. "But, even allowing that she had any means of getting a sight of those photographs, why should she fix the odium on Sebastian or try to represent this Elmira as a factor in his life?"

"That's just what there's no means of knowing," answered Rosanna; "for, bad as

she is—of course I mane with regard to her tongue,—I'd be loath to suspect her of purposely trying to blacken Mr. Sebastian with pitch that she got out of the past."

Louis remained in a deep reverie for some moments, slowly poking at the fire, as if that exercise were an aid to his thoughts; while the old woman let her anxious eyes wander from his face to the sparks that were leaping and flying, as if eager to escape up the chimney into that alien element of the air which would prove their destruction.

"It seems to me," said Louis at last, "that she must have got some clue, which she has wrongly applied and which has set her curiosity on a false scent. What with her malicious tongue, joined to Alfred's inquisitiveness, she has made herself an intolerable nuisance. I wonder my mother does not see it and try to put a stopper on her once for all."

He spoke irritably; for, indeed, he was sorely vexed as well as perturbed at the direction affairs seemed to be taking.

"It would take a good deal to stop her from talking—for very long, at any rate," said Rosanna; "and, with her smiling face, and the trick she has of making much of people, sure it's no surprise that an innocent lady like your mamma would be deceived by her. And there's Mr. Alfred! He thinks the world of her. And—God forgive me!—why shouldn't he and she his wedded wife!"

"All I know is," said Louis, angrily, "that if Eve were like her, it's not much wonder that she was driven out of Paradise and got Adam put out, too."

Rosanna, in spite of all her perturbation, could not help laughing.

"Wisha, it's the droll way you have with you, Mr. Louis!" she exclaimed.

"I never felt less like being droll in my life," he responded. "It's hard to know what may grow out of all this, and what is best to do. For a single imprudent word—and I'm sure that woman is speaking many of them—might be like a match to a mine."

"Now, don't take it to heart like that," said Rosanna, rising and laying her motherly hand upon the young man's shoulder; "or you'll make me sorry that I spoke a word. But just heed my advice. Leave things in the hands of God. When you kneel down every night and morning, or when you're before God's holy altar, commend the matter to Him and to His Holy Mother, and ask for light to do what's best."

The old woman, speaking thus, left Louis to his reflections, which were unusually gloomy and anxious. Suddenly to him had been transferred a portion of the load that had been weighing on Sebastian's patient shoulders; and, though he had no certainty, and only the merest conjecture to work upon, he found those considerations sufficiently disquieting. Could

there, he asked himself, be anything in all that to account for Sebastian's attitude with respect to Margie's marriage? It seemed as if, in the long hour or more that he sat thus smoking and thinking, he had got some insight into the mind of his brother, and was participating in those mental struggles which had left their lines on Sebastian's face. Weighing the pros and cons, he could not decide whether it was better to let matters remain as they were for some time longer, or to speak some word of warning to his younger brother. His final decision was that he should wait, keeping himself watchfully on the alert.

He heard, as he reached that conclusion, the bell from a neighboring clock tower strike, with solemn, deep-toned notes, the hour of midnight,—an hour which seldom found the Doctor out of bed unless his professional duties demanded the sacrifice.

"This will never do!" he said to himself. "I won't be good for anything to-morrow. And just when I have that important case on hand that calls for all my nerve!"

He looked, as it was his habit to do, at the fastenings of the doors, covered the smouldering embers of the fire with a guard of ashes, turned off the electric light, and, still thoughtful and depressed, went upstairs.

XXII.

SPACIOUS and old-fashioned was the Wilmot drawing-room in Gramercy Park. It was a long and wide apartment, divided in two by pillars. Its appointments were massive. Mahogany sofas displayed their carved and twisted legs to rival those of the tables that, marble-topped or otherwise, stood about, encumbering the space. Mantles of finest white Carrara marble were permitted to give evidence of the excellence of their workmanship, without obscuring drapery or mantleshef. They were overtopped by gold-framed mirrors, that had once been the pride and delight of every householder, and that reflected each movement of those within the room. The lace curtains on the windows,—all spoke of an era that had vanished. It was early Victorian, to which had been superadded the ugliness of the middle period; and here and there, faintly struggling like a gleam of light amongst the thick-matted foliage of a forest, was a modern touch. That had owed its origin to a time previous to that when Mrs. Wilmot had ceased struggling against her husband's will, which in this, as in a few other matters, had remained inflexible. He

had been constitutionally averse to change. He took pride in those massive articles, which early in his married life, and after moving into this dwelling, he had accumulated. Each had come to have for him a sort of individuality, and, in its solid, material way, stood as a guarantee of his prosperity.

The drawing-room, on a certain evening, had a plentiful sprinkling of guests, who had been bidden to hear Signor Cavalcanti, a new tenor, about whom Manhattan was prepared to rave; and also a Miss Fremont, who, though not a poetess herself, was a near relative of a great poet, and felt that she had a mission to interpret his poems to the multitude. Mrs. Rollins had been invited, and with her Dorothy Kent, from whom Sebastian was holding aloof, with an effort which turned his dark face almost gray in coloring, and seemed to emphasize the lines that had gathered about his mouth.

The gown that Miss Kent wore was, as he had heard some one say, of moonlight blue, shimmering in soft, radiant folds about her, catching every turn of the light. She was pleased, eager, interested; and her eyes met Sebastian's occasionally as he moved about amongst his guests, playing host mechanically, or stood against one of the pillars and listened to the poetess reciting, with an interest that flagged, or to the Signor as he sang. But in regard to the Italian the case was different. He seemed to be voicing every sentiment, every

emotion, that was hidden deep under impassive, well-bred exteriors, behind the smiling mask of gay and laughing faces,—in the old, with whom all sentiment was memory; in the young, with whom all sentiment was hope. To Sebastian, that burst of harmony seemed to give utterance to all that was pent up in his heart. He dared not then look at Dorothy, since that glance might have told her everything.

There was a hush when the man had done. Humanity, raised above itself, finds the descent to the commonplace abrupt; and perhaps in souls there is always the unconscious listening to the eternal harmonies that are their birth-right.

Forth from those spacious apartments led the dining-room, which had been the chief reason in the late Mr. Wilmot's mind for building an extension. It was a solid, square room high-ceilinged, and furnished with the same heavy furniture, and, as if by design, partook of its generally sombre character; only that it was saved from gloom by the innumerable electric lights, that transformed it into an almost magical brightness. They shone out from every corner of the ceiling, and they intersected each of the four walls. Now in this apartment were served ices and refreshments of a more solid description; and Sebastian realized with a kind of horror that Dorothy Kent would go thither with the rest. Indeed, he knew that her entrance into that room was

inevitable,—if not that evening, at some other time. He felt that he would fain, if there was any possible chance of so doing, put off that evil moment. Nevertheless, since she would have to go into that room, and be confronted with that which he feared, he was determined to bring her there himself, and seek, if possible, to distract her attention.

Dorothy meantime had been feeling somewhat hurt and resentful at the attitude which Sebastian had chosen to assume, even though it might be in deference to the wishes of Mrs. Rollins. She, however, accepted his invitation to take supper; and, quite unconscious of the anxiety that was torturing her companion, walked beside him through the pillars into the inner room. She was jesting and laughing as they went; for she did not want him to suspect that his previous inattention to her had been so much as remarked. She let her eyes roam, with an almost childlike curiosity in each new scene, around the vast apartment into which she was now ushered.

Sebastian, by a last futile effort, had striven to place her where the object of his dread might not too conspicuously confront her; and he talked with an almost feverish rapidity while he helped her to a salad from the table. In his heart was the hope that she might see without recognizing that picture upon the wall. But the eyes that could be so keen as well as sweet suddenly fixed themselves upon the portrait,

exceedingly large and exceedingly lifelike, which dominated the whole room,—the portrait of the late David Wilmot. The words that Dorothy had been saying died upon her lips, the fork that she had been daintily raising from the plate remained suspended, while through her whole being ran a thrill of surprise, intense, overpowering. Sebastian, who stood by in an agony of suspense, saw at once that his hope had been vain, and that Dorothy's direct glance had identified the faded photograph of half a century before with the florid, complacent countenance that loomed so large from the canvas, though the features had grown heavy and the hair grizzled.

Before her surprise had turned to consternation, or she had time to collect her thoughts, she exclaimed involuntarily:

“Why, that is wonderfully like—why, surely it is the original of—”

“That,” said Sebastian, placing himself directly in front of her (for he knew that Mrs. Alfred was near at hand, and observing Dorothy's every movement),—“that is the portrait of my father.”

Dorothy's exclamation of wonder, of horror, was instantly suppressed, and her wits were once more keenly on the alert, especially as she caught the inquiring glance of Mrs. Alfred. She realized by a quick flash of intuition all the features of the situation, and particularly where they concerned Sebastian. Inwardly,

she was trembling with emotion, excitement, as when one is suddenly brought into the presence of a great calamity. Outwardly, she was calm. It was a dramatic moment, which both those chief actors therein felt to the innermost depths of their being; though some one in the drawing-room was playing a gay waltz, which came floating in through the rows of pillars; and though Dorothy, looking hastily toward Mrs. Wilmot, perceived that she was placidly eating an ice at the other side of the table, and chatting with her neighbor. All around were well-dressed, conventionally joyous people, who had suddenly become spectral to Dorothy, and who had so little idea of anything unusual in their surroundings.

Perhaps half the pathos of life, even its tragedy, consists in that perpetual intermingling of the trivial and the tragic,—the little weeds that grow upon a grave or the beams of sun that shine there, regardless of the agony of hearts half broken beside it; the wavelets that play where human lives have disappeared beneath treacherous waters; the children that romp beside a bier, or familiar household things,—some article of dress, some book or piece of paper, remaining to wring the survivor's heart when the hand that touched it has mouldered into dust.

Meanwhile there was Mrs. Alfred hovering about, and, with an eye ever on the watch for what was new, finding something unusual in

the attitude of those two—Dorothy and Sebastian. For already she had coupled them together in her own mind, and felt that there was at least what she called a *rapprochement* between them,—a drawing together which was certainly to be deplored. She paused and laid a caressing hand upon Dorothy's shoulder.

"You are looking very grave," she said, "though just as sweet and pretty as ever."

"How nice of you!" replied Dorothy, with a forced laugh. "And how very encouraging!"

"I suppose," said Mrs. Alfred, "that that little pensive air is because you are still thinking of that likeness,—the original of something unexplained."

She laughed maliciously at Dorothy's slight start.

"Oh, it does not do," she said, "to have too expressive a countenance, and a clear voice that carries far, especially if there are any of those pretty little secrets one wants to conceal!"

But Dorothy had already drawn down over her features a mask of smiling imperturbability, by which she had the power of veiling all play of the features. And this, despite the fact that she was still quivering from the shock of that sudden comprehension, of the acute sympathy, with which she had met the challenging gaze of Sebastian, and heard his words, smiting like anvil strokes:

"That is the portrait of my father."

Dorothy contrived to laugh, naturally this

time, while she went on composedly eating her salad.

"How funny," she said, "to be thinking of mysteries and concealments here in a modern drawing-room, in the heart of Manhattan! But if you have any curiosity as to our conversation, it was about the portrait. It is very like a photograph of Mr. Sebastian that Margie showed me once."

"O my dear Miss Kent," cried Mrs. Alfred, "where are your eyes? Sebastian is the very image of his mother."

As Dorothy looked quickly toward the handsome, well-preserved woman who was sitting on the other side of the room, she acknowledged to her herself that, though the whole character of their faces was different, it was his mother whom he resembled, and this despite a certain far-away resemblance to the portrait on the wall. This was so slight that it might not have struck an observer, unless the relationship between the younger and the older man had been explained. It was this vague resemblance which Sebastian had at first feared that Dorothy might detect in the photograph, and it was upon this that the girl based her next assertion.

"Likenesses are such subtle things!" she remarked. "And I must admit there is a resemblance between that portrait and Mr. Sebastian."

Mrs. Alfred continued to regard her with a bright, penetrating glance.

"You found it," she said, "at first quite a startling resemblance."

Startled Dorothy certainly had been, though not by that resemblance; but now she only gazed with a blank stare into the eyes that were seeking to probe hers for some mystery.

"Does it matter very much?" she inquired; and the words, tranquilly spoken, acted as a quietus upon the restless inquisitiveness of the other; for nothing is more disconcerting than to be informed that one is making unnecessary fuss over the casual and the ordinary.

"No, it doesn't matter in the least," answered Mrs. Alfred, recovering her equanimity and breaking up the tête-à-tête, which had been in progress, by stationing herself beside the girl.

Meanwhile Dorothy was passionately ranging herself upon Sebastian's side against this woman, and against the whole world if necessary. Tumultuously rising within her was a new feeling superadded to the interest which Sebastian had already inspired. She recognized the strength, the force, with which he had concealed everything, and the heroic quality with which this action had invested that tall and grave young man, before whom, for the first time, she now felt impelled to bow down. In that moment, which to his troubled imagination meant defeat, he had conquered and won that which it would be impossible for him to press forward and claim. It was neither his

money, his commanding position as head of a great firm, nor even his cleverness and his quick sympathies that appealed to her just then: it was that moral force which had made him capable of acting as he had done. For she divined more than any explanation could have made known to her,—much of what Sebastian had to endure since this secret had been thrust into his keeping.

She trembled lest he should return from the table where he was busily engaged in serving others, and that, under the gaze of Mrs. Alfred, she should have to meet his eyes. So much had seemed to happen in those few seconds! He had become, as it were, so much nearer to her; and she felt an eager desire to assure him of her understanding, her loyalty, and her discretion. What it must have cost him, she reflected, to utter those few words and to warn back into silence her imprudence! Raising her eyes, she said to Mrs. Alfred, with a determined carrying of the war into Africa:

“You like, don’t you, to startle people by making personal remarks?”

Mrs. Alfred, in return, gave her arm a pinch,—playful, of course, but which showed what those fingers might be capable of in actual warfare.

“You little witch!” she said, in her sweetest tones. “No wonder somebody is bewitched!”

This remark, which was unexpected, and which would have left Dorothy very calm on

any previous occasion, now sent the blood tingling to her face, as well as a thrill of new-found happiness through her whole being. Even that commonplace and partly malicious statement of what she now fervently hoped might be the case, rejoiced her. To Mrs. Alfred, however, she merely replied, with something that was almost contemptuous in her tone: "You *are* personal."

Mrs. Alfred laughed her peculiar, noiseless laugh, that did not in the least suggest merriment. She was wondering, indeed, at that very moment how she could succeed in turning Sebastian against the girl; or, failing that, to reverse the process. For more than one reason that seemed good to herself, she did not want Dorothy to come into the family. She felt quite assured that the girl's beauty, with her charm and accomplishments, would give her a foremost place in the circle, and would tend very much to strengthen Sebastian's position as the most important member of the Wilmot connection. By a sentiment of family pride which was apparently contradictory she wished the young man, as the head of the business, to marry well, and to look much higher than a "companion" for his wife. But she would have liked to consider such a wife merely as a valuable asset for the Wilmots, on account of money or influential relations or a foremost rank in society, and not at all for merely accidental and inherent qualities, which would

have the effect only of investing a future Mrs. Sebastian with personal importance, and which would be calculated to overshadow all others. Moreover, from pure malice of heart against Sebastian, which she now extended to the girl whom he seemed to favor, she felt a consuming desire to take the field against their budding romance and to kill it.

During the last few moments of that evening, she had believed herself to have come upon the scent of some mystery, or at least some secret, which Sebastian, who had lately seemed to be surrounding himself with mysteries, held in common with this girl, this outsider. What it could be it taxed all her ingenuity to surmise; and she said angrily within herself that this Sebastian—contrary to all the traditions of the Wilmots, who were plain, straightforward men—had been acting lately like the hero of a cheap melodrama, and had now permitted this strange girl to pierce the veil of that secrecy which he had set up between himself and the members of his family. It vexed her sorely to discover, after a few moments more of futile skirmishing, that she could learn nothing from Dorothy except what that quick blush had betrayed; and possibly even that might have been merely the effect of surprise.

Having come to this conclusion, Mrs. Alfred deliberately replaced her sherbet glass upon the table and passed on her way, apparently as smiling and in as imperturbable good humor

as ever. She gave Dorothy's arm another little parting pinch and whispered:

"Don't be too hard on poor Sebastian, since he has lately been getting himself into all manner of scrapes."

Sebastian, seeing that she had departed, presently returned, and stood silent and in deep depression beside Dorothy. All the faculties of his mind were concentrated on that which had occurred. He wondered what were Dorothy's thoughts, and he was grateful that she had so promptly and with singular coolness parried Mrs. Alfred's attack. He felt the air of the room oppressive, as if an electric storm were impending; and the silence, though only of the briefest duration, appeared to him intolerable. It was with a sense of desperation that he finally felt moved to say:

"That is a very good portrait of my father."

"Is it?" asked Dorothy, turning and fixing upon it eyes that were darkened by stress of feeling, while her voice was tremulous with intense and conflicting emotions. "I was quite wrong, though; he is not at all like you."

"No," said Sebastian, "I don't really think I resemble him." (He was recalling how only the other day he had clung to that hope, which had now proved futile.) "I am usually said to look like my mother."

"Are you like her in other ways?" Dorothy said, feeling the next moment that the question was an idle one.

Sebastian, however, replied gravely:

"It is very hard to tell. I suppose I am like her in some other ways."

Dorothy continued to gaze at the portrait, unconsciously comparing it with the photograph that had played so large a part in the drama of poor Elmira's existence, and upon which she had set so many hopes. She noted the heavy droops of the eyelids, the purple-veined cheek that had become puffy, the thick neck set complacently above the immaculate shirt front and the broadcloth, outward symbols of that prosperity in the sunshine of which this man had basked; while, as a companion picture, there rose before her a woman dying in poverty and obscurity, and Elmira tormented by sordid anxieties, and dragging out her life in loneliness and dreariness,—Elmira, who was that man's daughter!

As she thus gazed and thus thought Sebastian burst forth with the feeling that was dominant in his mind.

"Since my poor father's death," he said, "I have had such a pity for him; for even his wealth was a heavy burden to him."

"You feel it because it is now yours," answered Dorothy, with a faint smile, and still keeping her eyes fixed upon the portrait.

"Oh, I am young and strong, but he was failing! I found those last days and hours of his life—the details of which, no doubt, you

have heard from Margie—pathetic in the extreme.”

Dorothy, however, was thinking of those others whose whole lives had also been pathetic; and still more, perhaps, of the burden that had been laid, by the original of that resplendent portrait, upon the man before her, and which the latter had so bravely accepted. Her whole nature was in revolt because of the injury done, apart from all other things, by the father to the son. She could think of little else just then.

“I have come to realize, too,” said Sebastian, who had a curious desire to win this girl over to sympathy with his father, and to make her feel that with him all had not been unalloyed happiness, and that he, too, was to be pitied,—“I have come to realize that a man in growing old becomes lonely with a loneliness that is like death.”

“Lonely,” said Dorothy, with a scornful little laugh, “with an attractive wife and daughter, not to speak of sons?”

“Lonely in the face of the whole world.”

“But surely,” Dorothy went on, “there must always be some one with whom the man is in sympathy,—some one who loves him, or who understands and will forgive everything.”

“But loneliness is always silent,” urged Sebastian; “and silence is terrible. It shuts one in from all the world.”

Both knew and felt that they had drifted

far from the commonplace groups around them,—far from their actual surroundings. It was as if they stood alone together, heart to heart and soul to soul, for those few thrilling moments. They were, in fact, as oblivious to all others in the room as though that vast apartment had been empty, except for the portrait. That seemed to fill far more than its allotted space.

Sebastian's back was to the room, and he let his eyes look deep into Dorothy's, as though they were saying:

"You know all now, and he and I are at your mercy. Deal with us as you will."

The expression of those other eyes seemed to answer:

"Yes, I know all, I understand all; and for you, at least, there is sympathy and full loyalty."

They remained thus some moments, that seemed to each close packed with all sorts of emotion. On his side was pleading, with a sweetness that the gravity of the situation only rendered deeper and more perilous. On her side was the one thought of compensating to Sebastian, in some way, for all that he must have suffered, and at the same time of making him feel quite safe in the knowledge that she possessed.

"When I brought you in here this evening," said Sebastian, in a voice so low, as to be almost a whisper, "I knew, I feared, what it

was inevitable you should discover. I have striven to keep his secret. But, oh, you must believe me that long before I met you I was trying, as he also had tried, to find Elmira!"

"I have never doubted that, at least so far as you are concerned," said Dorothy. "But now what can I say, what assurance can I give you how deeply I sympathize?"

"Sympathy more precious than anything else in the wide world," answered Sebastian.

"And now there is another thing," said the girl. "You have the photograph in your hands. It must never be seen by any other eyes. And, since it has become unnecessary, I give you my permission, which I am sure Elmira would ratify, to destroy it."

"As a proof of your confidence," said Sebastian, "I value that permission. But I shall retain it for the present, until there has been a full explanation with Elmira, and until the arrangements which I have been making for her advantage have been fully completed. I know you will believe me when I say that I shall feel myself relieved of a great burden when Elmira's future has been secured."

The dining-room by that time was nearly deserted; and it was Mrs. Wilmot herself who came to remind them, in her pleasant, friendly fashion, that the Signor was going to sing again, and that they would hear better in the drawing-room.

"I need not tell you," Sebastian whispered

to Dorothy, as they followed his mother through the pillars, "that *she* does not know, and must never know."

XXIII.

Now, Sebastian, who had seriously taken to heart the few simple but earnest words which Rosanna had spoken to him, was further impressed, naturally, by what Margie had said, as to the prayers that were being offered up and the covenant that had been made upon his behalf by those three who were so deeply interested in his welfare. The resolution that was taking root in his mind had been brought to the culminating point during that interview with Dorothy, when the latter, in a scarcely veiled appeal to himself which he could not choose but understand, had urged him to return to his God, and to heal the breach which had been opened between himself and the practices of his youth. Apart from any question of love, or the attraction which drew him toward Dorothy, the innate chivalry of his nature led him to respond to that appeal, and to show this girl that her words had not fallen upon deaf ears. Moreover, that faith which had been darkened in the mental chaos that had followed upon his father's death, was struggling into the light again, and power-

fully impelling him toward the only refuge of peace and security.

One midday therefore (having purposely chosen the hour following upon the dinner of the community, when the priest he sought would most likely be free), he found himself in a plain, square room, which once had been familiar to him. It was destitute of ornament, save for a crucifix, large and impressive, and an engraving of the Mother of Sorrows. Sebastian seated himself in a chair and waited, watching the sunlight coming in through the high windows and making patterns upon the polished floor with a peculiar suggestion of peacefulness.

Sebastian's mind was not, however, at rest. He was still struggling with all sorts of considerations for and against the resolution he had taken; and the struggle seemed to grow and strengthen, as if this peaceful room were really a battle-ground. It came upon him with overwhelming force that it would be a violation of his promise to the dead to talk as it would be necessary to do to the priest, and to acquaint him with so much that had hitherto been buried in secrecy. Indeed, so strong became the impulse to escape before the religious should appear, that he actually rose to his feet and advanced toward the door. The porter, who was placidly saying his beads in the hall, saw the movement and came forward.

"You must not get tired waiting," he said pleasantly. "The Father for whom you asked will be here in a minute."

With an odd feeling that the porter was a jailer who barred his escape, Sebastian sank once more into a chair. He had not to wait long. Presently the priest appeared, not by that door upon which the young man's eyes had been expectantly fixed, but by another behind where Sebastian was sitting. The door had been opened so quietly that the young man started violently when a hand was laid upon his shoulder and a kindly voice said:

"So you have come to see me at last!"

Sebastian rose to his feet, confusedly.

"Yes, Father," he responded. "I have been wanting to come and see you before, but I have been very busy."

"It is a busy world," remarked the priest. "We are like ants upon our hill. But sit down, my dear boy,—sit down, and let us talk!"

He was shaking Sebastian's hand all the time that he talked thus, and smiling into his face. A new confidence and hope seemed to emanate from the venerable figure, and those lineaments, rather harsh and rugged in outline, but breathing forth benignancy. A sudden and irresistible longing came over the young man to cast all his burdens on this strength, and to obtain the guidance so sorely needed.

It had been said, as Sebastian had long ago heard, that this man was a soldier in his youth,

and had forsaken that career, where he had already obtained speedy advancement; as he had previously forsaken his ancestral home, which had given lodgement during the centuries to a long line of nobles, and of men who had served their country conspicuously, and had put on the humble garb of religion.

“Now, my Sebastian,” he said,—“for your name is Sebastian, I see by your card, and I also know it from the registers of one of our colleges,—what is it we are going to talk about, you and I? You can speak freely. Although the seal of confession is not upon our discourse, it will be buried, if you so desire, in the same oblivion.”

“Father,” Sebastian said, “I ought to tell you, first of all, that I have been staying away from church and giving up all my religious duties.”

“Ah!” replied the old priest, with a deep sigh. “You have been as a reed shaken in the desert. The world is that desert. You have had many troubles, cares, temptations. But One has been waiting for you all the time. And now His Heart will be glad that you have come. And I am glad, too, as if a beloved son had returned to his father’s house.”

Possibly, Sebastian had expected reproaches, stern reproof, a scathing arraignment of his weakness; but this kindness, which caught and encircled him, as it were, in the meshes of a net, moved him to the verge of tears.

"Would you wish," suggested the priest, very gently, "to go to confession first, that the Blood of Christ may wash you free from your sins by holy absolution?"

But Sebastian, who had not counted upon going so soon to confession, begged that he might be allowed first to tell all, and afterward prepare himself a little for the Sacrament. The priest did not insist further, but encouraged him to speak out freely and without reserve, as if he were indeed at confession.

Then the young man poured forth his heart, relating everything in detail, but with a business-like conciseness and precision such as would have been carried into any commercial affair. He recounted what had happened upon the day of his father's death,—their return home together, and the conversation that had taken place. Unconsciously dramatic, he brought before his hearer's mind his own uneasiness, that had led him to go and find his father—first at work, and then done with work forever in the rest of death. He finally described the scene in his father's study,—that awful, never-to-be-forgotten midnight, when he had been brought face to face with the spectre from his father's past; and when, going into the room where the mortal remains of him who had sinned and repented still lay, he had registered his solemn promise to keep that secret inviolable, so far as the members of the family or of the household were concerned.

The priest listened with bent head, never interrupting the speaker by so much as a gesture. Once before he had heard the matter in all its essential details, as, indeed, Sebastian had suspected; but he permitted the young man to continue his narrative until he concluded with the explanation that he had feared his vow of silence would be broken by speaking of the matter to a priest.

"Oh, that could not be so!" was the response. "It would be a wicked promise, and one not to be kept, that prevented you from going to your God."

"I understand that now," said Sebastian. "I see how foolish I have been."

"And, my poor boy," added the old priest, with infinite gentleness, "how much you must have suffered in trying to bear that burden alone, when you might have had that strength to lean upon!"

By a slight gesture he indicated the crucifix, whose majestic calm seemed to pervade the apartment,—the rigid figure so lifelike; the face agonized but divine; the head slightly bent under that crown of most excruciating torment,—a crown which, more than any other in all the kingdoms of the earth, has been able to gain adherents, and to hold them with an imperishable power.

Meanwhile the old priest, with his head upon his breast, seemed to consider those matters which the young man had placed before him,

and to permit, perhaps, the suggestion contained in his last words to take full effect.

"Sebastian," he began, after a brief silence which had seemed to bind the room as with a spell, "your father, indeed, sinned; but, as I told you before, he repented with so true a sorrow that I feel assured he has found mercy. And you must know that he acquainted me, as a confidential friend, with these matters. He did not bind me to secrecy; but that, of course, was implied,—except in such an emergency as this which has arisen, and which I knew would arise, since I have been expecting you to come to me for help. He also informed me of the efforts which he had made, both before and after his marriage with your mother, to find the woman who had been his wife. For it was his desire all the time to make her such financial compensation as he could. That poor woman, you now tell me, has long been dead; but the child, the daughter, is still living, and has been found by quite providential circumstances. Your late parent expected to live yet some years, and made still more efforts for the discovery of those people, and to carry out himself those arrangements which he desired to make in their favor. So we are all accustomed to count upon that which least of all other things is ours—time."

While Sebastian listened to these observations of the priest, it was borne in upon him more forcibly than ever how futile had been his

concealment, and his fear of coming straight to this excellent adviser to unburden himself of those facts with which all the time the latter had been familiar, as also with the dead man's hopes and wishes.

The priest, after a short pause, during which he apparently waited for the young man to speak, went on:

"Although I was aware of these circumstances, I did not feel at liberty to speak until you had made the first advances. It was acting upon my advice that your father left you those detailed instructions, making you acquainted with all the sad circumstances, and with what he had previously done, or desired to do, for those two unfortunates. When I called at your home soon after your parent's death, it was my hope that you would then break the silence and give me the right to console and assist you. But since your father informed me, on that last morning of his life, when he came to assist at early Mass, that he had almost finished a paper, addressed to you containing his testamentary instructions on all those points, there appeared to me nothing that I could do. He expressed the fullest confidence that you would carry out his instructions to the letter. Of course, if your father had lived, and if that poor woman had been found, graver and more delicate questions might have arisen. But these need not be discussed now. God has been very merciful."

Sebastian bowed his head, as the priest thus spoke. He knew of what the latter was thinking.

"Now, my son," continued the priest, "I felt that you would eventually come to me. As I have told you, I expected you long before. And you will see how futile was your fear of me, or of any other priest of God. For, the first duty that would necessarily be recommended to you would be silence, discretion, absolute secrecy, unless where some vital question of right or justice was concerned."

"I see all that now, Father," admitted Sebastian. "I realize my mistake. But, happily, it is not irrevocable."

"No," said the priest. "But no doubt you found, as men are apt to do, how awful to the human soul is silence,—that silence into which no other fellow-being may penetrate. It may be partly for that reason our merciful God has provided the sacred tribunal of Penance, where the overburdened soul may find relief, and where the sins and the sorrows of humanity may be sunk as in a fathomless lake. For its secrets shall never be known until the dread accounting day."

It seemed almost as if the old priest were communing with himself as he thus spoke, rather than addressing his awestricken listener. The latter, meanwhile, sat with a sensation of relief so strong and tangible that it moved him, self-contained and self-reliant as he had always

been, to the verge of tears; for here, after his long repression and his long fear of betraying himself by word or gesture, he could discuss, in all its details, with its complexities and its difficulties, that pitiful story of human weakness and human wrongdoing. The holy calm of that room had been broken by many such recitals, which could be made only in such an atmosphere, with the shadow of the Crucified projecting over all; and to men who had themselves risen above human cares and sorrows and passions, and whose very frailties were swallowed up in the immensity of their sacred calling. To them there were no secrets: the heart of humanity, burned and seared by its vices and weaknesses, was an open book; their anointed hands were raised to pardon; their lips opened to utter counsel, dictated not by human wisdom but by that which is divine.

“And now, my good Sebastian—my brave, generous Sebastian, who have endured so many trials,—you will not leave me without going down upon your knees—in the church, if you will, or in my room upstairs, where many of my young men penitents prefer to come,—and receiving holy absolution. That is the gift which I will offer you to-day.”

All Sebastian's repugnance to the idea of confession had vanished. He asked only that he might be permitted to go into the adjoining church for a few moments, to make the neces-

sary preparation; after which he would follow the priest to his room.

"It is not necessary," said the latter, "that you should leave the building. Our chapel is vacant at this hour. It is quieter even than the church, and you shall stay there as long or as short a time as you will. I shall be waiting upstairs."

He led the way to the chapel; and, throwing open the door, Sebastian was left alone in its silence and religious recollection. In that holy spot, shut out from the world, there seemed to linger some reflection of the prayers and sacrifices of all the holy men who in the grey dawn of the early morning, while the rest of the world still slept, or when the day was declining and the shadows falling, gathered there to obtain new strength, for the stubborn fight they were waging against a world that hated and calumniated them.

When Sebastian knocked at the priest's door, the latter, investing himself with stole and surplice, prepared to hear the other's confession, and to speak a few burning words on the necessity of sorrow,—sorrow, above all, for the sins that were avowed. Those words of a saint penetrated so deep into Sebastian's soul that, long after the confessor had gone to rest in the community cemetery, they remained to be the penitent's guide under similar circumstances.

Sebastian arose, feeling light-hearted and

merry as he had not felt since boyhood or the pleasant college days; and the venerable priest, throwing off his solemnity as some ceremonial garment, jested and laughed with the whole-hearted enjoyment of a child. He had many a droll or curious anecdote to relate; and he was prepared to listen with interest to anything, no matter how trivial, that the young man had to tell.

After a time he had reverted, however, to the main topic that must be occupying his penitent's mind.

"We shall have to think it over together," he said,—“all these difficulties that have arisen. What, for instance, can be done about that beloved little sister—Margie you call her? I know Dr. Dever very well; and in this whole city you could not have found, if you tried, a more excellent husband for that charming young girl, whom I have remembered with pleasure ever since my meeting with her at your house. Perhaps we shall have to tell Gerald. It will be painful, but it will be the most straightforward course. And if you can not come forth from your silence, I will—at your request, but not otherwise—take that office upon myself.”

“I am hoping,” said Sebastian, to whom the idea was still exceedingly distasteful, “that Margie will decide otherwise. I wish—oh, how I wish that she would develop, as I used to think possible, a vocation!”

“That would be a good wish for any one,” laughed the priest; “but it would be painful to Gerald. And I do not know if Miss Margie would allow us to put on her the cap and veil of a religious. But there are one or two things about which I want to question you before you leave me. I have taken all these matters to heart, more than you can think; and I am going to help you, if there is any way of doing so. Have you ever considered how important, my Sebastian, is the precise date of this woman’s death.”

“But,” the young man stammered, “my father seemed to be quite convinced that she—that Elmira was not dead when he contracted his second marriage.”

“So he may have thought,” said the priest, shrewdly; “but so he could not have known, since he was not certain at the date of his own death that the woman had predeceased him. I am sure, however, that you have asked this question of Miss Kent, or that she has been told by her correspondent.”

“No!” cried Sebastian, feeling a tide of excitement rising in him, and a new light shining upon him that had never dawned before. “Elmira said distinctly, in a letter, which Miss Kent permitted me to read, and she had often said it before, that, on account of the confusion in her head, she could not remember the date of her mother’s death. She knew only that it was many years ago.”

"Ah, that will complicate matters!" answered the priest. "But perhaps we may be able to jog her memory, even if that faculty be temporarily obscured."

"I have but little hope," said Sebastian; "and indeed I never before thought that it could have taken place so long ago."

"Well, at least," observed the priest, "you may tell me the name of this woman."

"The Elmira who was my father's wife," said Sebastian, "had evidently retained her maiden name, or chosen another to cover her flight."

"Of course," replied the priest; "and likely the latter, which would have been more difficult for your late father to trace."

"Her Christian names," said Sebastian, "were Sarah Elmira."

"Sarah Elmira?" echoed the priest, as if striving to recall something. "The latter is a rather uncommon name."

"And the family name by which she was known was Johnson."

"Johnson?" cried the priest,—"Sarah Elmira Johnson. Wonderful are the ways of God! I begin to think, I begin to hope, that there is a way in which I can, indeed, help you. But I should like to look at the notes which it is my habit to keep of extraordinary cases that have come in my way."

He rose and went to a little corner cupboard where there were a few books of devotion or

of reference, and some notebooks wherein he had marked down curious facts. These latter he turned over, while Sebastian sat watching him with strained eyes and a heart that was beating fast. He studied each date upon the cover, and at last found one upon which he laid an impressive finger. He brought it over to the table, and drew thither a chair, upon which he seated himself opposite the expectant Sebastian. Having turned over the leaves for some moments in silence, he began at last to read:

“On the evening of November the 12th, while I was giving a mission in the town of Wichita, Kansas, I was called to attend a woman, a non-Catholic, who expressed a great desire to see me. When I arrived, she was unconscious, and could consequently tell me nothing. I learned from the woman of the house, an Irish Catholic, that she was a Methodist, in so far as she had practised any religion; and that she had one daughter, whom, however, I did not see, but who, she thought, was about twelve or fourteen years of age. It was her belief, though she was not positive, that her lodger had a husband alive somewhere, but she had been very reticent about her affairs. There was little I could do. The patient died that night; and the girl, whom I saw then for the first time, could not be induced to speak. She was adopted, as I learned later, by a woman of that town. Now, my Sebastian,” the priest

said, laying down the book, "what we have to find out are certain details of time and of place. The latter, no doubt, can be furnished by Miss Kent or her correspondent. And then it remains for us only to compare the date in this book with that of your father's marriage."

Details which Sebastian had scarcely noted when he read the letter now flamed up and seemed to burn in his brain,—the name of the southwestern town; the fact that the mother had died unconscious, without revealing, as she had previously promised to do, her husband's name; and the fact that Elmira, the daughter, had been but a growing girl at the time. In his eagerness, Sebastian fairly gasped out his next words:

"Those details that I have learned from the letter which Miss Kent gave me to read agree exactly with your notes, Father. All that I want to know now from that note-book is the date of this death."

"And that you shall have," declared the priest, "if you will first give me the date of your father's second marriage."

Sebastian with trembling lips mentioned that date, which was, of course, perfectly familiar to him. The face of the priest lighted up instantly; tears of sympathy stood in his eyes; and, rising from his chair, he grasped the young man by both hands.

"My dear, dear boy," he cried joyously, "let us give thanks and praise to God! For,

since the dates in that notebook are absolutely correct, and since you can accurately supply that other date, then I may tell you that Sarah Elmira Johnson—or shall we call her Sarah Elmira Wilmot?—died just six months before your father's second marriage."

The relief was so extreme that Sebastian, sinking into a chair, laid his head upon the table in a passion of sobs that fairly shook his frame.

XXIV.

It had been a beautiful day for that time of year,—full of soft lights and shadows: pale gleams, that had something sad and wintry in them, suddenly bursting into exuberant sunshine, that recalled the heart of mid-summer,—the merry days of the season's prime.

Margie had gone for a long walk with Dorothy,—the latter arrayed in her very best, that she might not be “altogether an incongruous figure” in the throng that blazed the trail of Fashion the whole length of the Avenue.

“It would be nice to be rich, Margie,” said her companion, with a sigh. “But you are rich already, so you can't understand the feeling that sometimes comes over one who has always been poor. Of course there are other times when nothing matters except to be young, able to enjoy life and to struggle for oneself. I am not sure,” she added thoughtfully, “that I should not miss the struggle if suddenly I had all I wanted for myself and others.”

She was in a mood of exhilaration that day, because she was still rejoicing—though, with Margie, she had grown very reticent on the

subject of Sebastian—at the thought of those brief passages between herself and the head of the Wilmot firm, in the drawing-room at Mrs. Rollins', when he had all but betrayed himself, and when she had felt that his secret was his no longer; and again on that memorable occasion, before the portrait, at the house in Gramercy Park. It was then that her own sentiments had also shown themselves in their true colors—as love. She scarcely attempted any longer to conceal from herself that fact as she walked thus soberly along in the sunshine, joyful in the consciousness that she loved Sebastian Wilmot.

One thing appeared very certain to her: that she could never marry any one else. And if for some reason (she wondered if it could be for that reason which had been suddenly made clear to her when standing before the portrait) he did not come forward to ask her, then she would remain as she was—single, earning the bread of independence, all the days of her life. When she had expressed the idle wish to be rich, it occurred to her that only Sebastian Wilmot could realize that desire, while giving her at the same time something infinitely more precious, for which she would have been willing to sacrifice all the rest. It would be pleasant to be made rich by him, and, through his instrumentality, to be able to help more efficaciously those whom, in her present circumstances, she had been trying to help.

But she acknowledged that, if he were to lose all his wealth, she would joyfully begin life over again at his side, and find happiness in so doing. And this acknowledgment she was able to make deliberately, since she had no romantic idea of poverty, but was fully conversant with its stern realities, its continual deprivations.

Whenever Margie, who was curious as to her friend's attitude and deeply interested in knowing how the affair with Sebastian was progressing, brought that brother's name into the conversation, Dorothy made efforts to elude it. She called Margie's attention to some passing motor, or turned aside to look in at a shop window. Once this had occurred when the pedestrians were opposite a florist's window, to which Dorothy, with exclamations of delight, called her companion's attention. It was ablaze with gorgeous bloom,—those that the late season afforded, or those that had been brought thither from the South or from some hothouse. Their colors of glowing red, of purple rich as the ripened grape, of yellow or of dull crimson, were all set in living green.

Now, between the beauty of flowers more, perhaps, than any other form of beauty, and that state of mind which finds all Nature and the world around beautiful and harmonious, there is a strong affinity. The rich coloring, the delicate pattern, the sentiment that lurks in each petal or lies hidden in the deep hearts,

seem to correspond to that sentiment which, in the young and ardent, constitutes the joy of living. Dorothy then feasted her eyes upon those flowers, with a new and intimate pleasure in their loveliness; and in the eyes that gazed there was a mist of tears, and on the lips a smile tender and radiant. And yet Sebastian had spoken no word of love, but deep in her heart she knew. He had never hinted at the possibility of coming forward as a suitor, and Mrs. Rollins had told her definitely that he was not a marrying man. But what did that matter? How did that prevent her intuitions from being correct, and her knowledge from being certain?

"I wish," said Margie, suddenly and petulantly, "that you and Sebastian would make up your minds."

"To what?" asked Dorothy, and this time she stopped and directed her companion toward a milliner's window, where, unfortunately, only a specimen or two of the season's headgear were displayed.

"To fall in love or not."

"Oh, is that what you want us to do?" said Dorothy, apparently intent on a black velvet toque, with a single costly plume, that would have looked enchanting on her own head.

"I have been wanting that for a long time," added Margie.

"It is a parlous thing, this falling in love,"

said Dorothy, with a happy, rippling laugh.

"Not for two people so perfectly suited to each other."

"Are we?"

"To be sure! And, then, if you will only take my advice—I am certain Sebastian has done so already—the next thing will be a wedding."

"Oh, you must have skipped lots of chapters!" cried Dorothy. "That comes in only at the end of the volume."

"For I want to be bridesmaid."

"You may be sure of that—if ever I am married," replied Dorothy. "But I am convinced that your wedding will come long before, and I shall have to be content with—what is it they call it now?—a matron of honor."

A shadow passed over Margie's face and she looked troubled at that observation, recalling Sebastian's grave words when he had tried to dissuade her from all thoughts of marriage.

"For I know quite well," declared Dorothy, "that your anxiety on my behalf is just a case of misery loves company. So you and the handsome Gerald will have to lead the way, and sometime I may follow, though I can't see yet that there is any bridegroom in sight."

"I'll tell you what you are trying to do," said Margie, solemnly,—“to bluff. But it's no use. I know just how everything is going to turn out."

"Why, you have developed into a prophetess," laughed Dorothy. "But you had better

not be giving out any of these predictions to your brother,—or I shall have to do something desperate, just to prove the absence of complicity. But, really, Margie, isn't that an ideal little toque? And the brown one over there, with just the faintest touch of gold, would suit you to perfection. I wish they had put out a lot more hats. It is the only opportunity poor girls have of feasting their eyes, and—stealing ideas. I wonder, by the way, if that is quite fair or honest?"

Arm in arm, the two girls moved on their way,—now in the sunlight, now in the deep shadow, projected by massive buildings.

Sebastian in the meantime was rushing uptown, with an inward exhilaration, the result of his interview with the priest, and his wonderful discovery, which carried him along at a tremendous pace. Just above Forty-Second Street, on the Avenue, in the shadow of the reservoir, he very nearly ran into Mrs. Rollins. He stopped at once to greet her.

"Oh, Mrs. Rollins," he said breathlessly, "I am so glad to meet you! I was just wondering how I should arrange things. May I walk with you a little way?"

He accommodated his pace to hers, and walked on with her; though he saw she was plainly going in the opposite direction to her house, whither his own course had been tending. Mrs. Rollins, whose manner was still somewhat cool and dry, wondered what on earth it could

be that the young man wanted to say. And the more so, as she noted at once the excitement in his manner and the new and joyous expression upon his face. It seemed to her, in fact, as she cast sidelong glances at him, that years might have been taken from his age since that day when, haggard and careworn, he had come to ask permission for an interview with Miss Kent.

Commenting upon this circumstance, Mrs. Rollins said:

"You are looking very much better than when I saw you last."

Sebastian, who had been trying to arrange in what form of words he should proffer his request, answered hastily:

"Oh, yes, I am all right,—feeling as well as possible! But one reason why I was so glad to meet you is that I was going to telephone and ask you if I might call upon Miss Kent this afternoon at your house."

"Another business affair,—another photograph to be shown?" asked Mrs. Rollins, ironically.

Sebastian, laughing boyishly, shook his head.

"Come, come, now, my dear Sebastian!" the lady said, though her tone was kindly, and her old prepossession in favor of this young man was rising strong within her. "This will never do. On one pretence or another, I suppose you will contrive to see her as often as possible

until I shall have to send her home. What does it all mean?"

"The usual thing," said Sebastian, smiling frankly into her inquiring eyes,—“the moth always rushing, at any risk, toward the candle.”

“The moth must positively keep away from my candle.”

“You are determined he shall not singe himself.”

“And, besides, I want to protect the candle.”

“But you must really give me this one permission,” observed Sebastian, in his most persuasive manner. “I think it will be quite enough to settle everything, one way or another. Perhaps, indeed, the candle will turn upon the moth.”

“But, Sebastian,” said the lady, severely, “you seem to be serious.”

“I *am* serious,” he answered gravely,—“heart and soul in earnest, Mrs. Rollins. What I want to ask Miss Kent this afternoon is to marry me or else put me out of pain and have done with it,—burn up the moth.”

Mrs. Rollins stopped and gazed at him with open-mouthed astonishment; while, by an involuntary movement, she drew him out of the way of the passers-by, and nearer to the wall of the reservoir, the opposite end of which they had just then reached.

“But I thought you told me—well, something very different?”

“Yes,” agreed Sebastian: “I told you that

it was impossible for me to think of marrying; and the Giant Despair—do you remember the Giant Despair in the panorama of our childhood?—had fast hold of me that day. But now it is quite different. Don't you see how blue the sky is up there, Mrs. Rollins, and how the sun is shining?"

Mrs. Rollins, in the agitation of her mind, gave a casual glance upward; but the glance went no farther than the wall of the reservoir, from which the damp was oozing.

"You are a mad boy, Sebastian!" she cried. "What have the sky and the sun to do with these practical matters?"

"They are only typical."

"Well, let me see!" went on Mrs. Rollins. "You are wanting to marry Dorothy, and are asking my permission to go and propose to her."

"Yes, I am," declared Sebastian; "and trembling in my boots—or at least I shall be when you have given your consent and I find myself really in her presence."

The lady, in her own despite, was smiling sympathetically. There is something so infectious in gladness of heart. And, then, she could not help thinking what a splendid match this would be for Dorothy, whom, moreover, she half suspected of a genuine fondness for the young man. Her family at home were so very poor,—poorer than ever just now, so that she had to send them almost all her earnings; and

there were such a number of them, mostly too young as yet to help themselves. And, perhaps, after all, the lady reflected, Mrs. Alfred may have been mistaken. At the worst, Sebastian might settle down. So many young men were wild; and the very fact that the youngest Wilmot now wanted to marry and to settle up this matter was in his favor. All these and many more thoughts were circling under Mrs. Rollins' fashionable bonnet; and she came to the conclusion that perhaps she had better not bar the way, if Dorothy were willing to take the risk. Sebastian was certainly good-tempered and clever, and had been very devoted to his mother and sister.

"You see," Sebastian went on, "I have been so very much in love with her all the time that it seems now as if I could never tell her quickly enough, and make an effort to win her before anything else might turn up."

He made this admission deliberately to Mrs. Rollins (though he would have preferred not to talk about the affair), because he felt that in some sort he owed it to Dorothy on account of the explanation he had previously made to Mrs. Rollins.

"Well," said that lady, forsaking the reservoir and beginning to walk again, with the young man at her side, "I suppose I shall have to let Dorothy decide for herself. But you know that I have heard things that have made me very anxious."

"And I give you my word of honor," cried Sebastian, "that the things you have heard are all moonshine! And, if you wish, I shall get your informant, who is quite well known to me, to tell you that she has been utterly mistaken."

"Oh, I assure you," began Mrs. Rollins, "if you mean Mrs. Alfred Wilmot—"

"Mrs. Alfred Wilmot be hanged," said Sebastian, half whimsically; "or at least let her tongue be put in pickle."

"But do you think for one moment she would have spoken to me of these stories if there was not something in them?"

"All I know," said Sebastian, "is that there is absolutely nothing in them. The worst that could be alleged against me—and, of course, that was bad enough—was that I neglected my religion for a time. That is all right now, thank God! I have been to see the priest, and in future that is not likely to happen."

"About religion," said Mrs. Rollins, "I can not judge. Few men nowadays—I mean amongst my acquaintances—seem to have any; though I will say that we rather expect you Catholics to have more, and to live up to your profession. But, from my point of view, I could not very well oppose an eligible suitor for Miss Kent on the ground of religion. Still, it is satisfactory to hear that you mean to attend your church in future. It is a safeguard."

"A great one," agreed Sebastian, who was

getting anxious, however, to obtain her final word on the subject, the import of which he could now foresee.

"Well, if I may accept your assurance," the lady said, "that there is no serious objection in your present conduct?"

"There is nothing," said Sebastian, gravely, "either in my present or past conduct that you would consider a serious objection."

"Then I give you my free and full consent. Go and find out Dorothy's feelings on the subject. And you may remember that, before all those stories reached my ears, it was my dearest wish that you and she should make a match. I even went so far as to speak my mind on the subject."

"And afterward," laughed the young man, "to take it all back again, and tell me that you did not want me even to speak to Dorothy."

"You did not seem so very anxious," remarked Mrs. Rollins, slyly. "I suppose, like most rich young men, you realized your own importance, and thought you could bide your time."

"I *had* to bide it," replied Sebastian, "until I could get a tangle of business affairs straightened out."

"Well," said Mrs. Rollins, even though her smile was a trifle incredulous, "I wish you success now with all my heart."

"A thousand thanks!" cried the young man.

"And you won't mind if I leave you? I am all impatience to reach your house."

"I am not quite sure that you will find Dorothy at home," said the lady. "She went for a walk with your sister Margie. But she promised to be in about five."

"If she has not come in, may I wait?" asked Sebastian.

"Yes, of course," replied Mrs. Rollins. "Don't leave there on any account till you have seen her."

Mrs. Rollins thought, as she watched her late companion flying down the street, that he was quite beside himself, and that it was absurd to be in such haste now, when he had let so much time elapse before.

XXV.

SEBASTIAN arrived at Mrs. Rollins' house, only to be told that Miss Kent was out, but that she had left word she would be back not later than five. Sebastian looked at his watch: it wanted only a few moments of that time. He announced his intention of waiting, and was shown into the drawing-room,—there where he had first met Dorothy, where he had held that memorable conversation with her, and had read Elmira's letter. He walked about, as he had done on a previous occasion, examining with a lacklustre eye the pictures and the statuary, and keeping his ear open for any sounds that might betoken the return of Dorothy Kent. The time, of course, seemed long; but when Dorothy at last arrived, hearing that some one was waiting for her, she came all radiant into the room. Her walking costume of dark blue, that fitted her so perfectly, the small toque resting on the shining hair, seemed but the setting to that priceless pearl which, as Sebastian thought, with fast-beating heart, he had come hither to claim. In Dorothy's cheeks was a spot of scarlet color, from the touch of the November air; her eyes were

sparkling, yet softened by some happy emotion.

Sebastian, carried away completely by the rush of his joyful emotions, advanced from the shadow where he was waiting, and, just as the girl realized who the visitor was, took her into his arms. He had not calculated what the effect of this proceeding, without any previous explanation, would naturally be upon Dorothy. He held her but for an instant, and then his arms dropped to his sides in consternation, as he realized what he had done. Nor did the color deepening upon Dorothy's cheeks, the flame that flashed into her eyes, or the anger that fairly shook her small frame, conduce to restoring his equanimity.

"You must be mad," she said breathlessly, "quite out of your senses, or you never would have dared—"

To Dorothy, familiarities of any kind had always been abhorrent: and her Southern blood blazed into wrath at the idea that Sebastian, of all others, had ventured to forget himself.

Without a word, Sebastian knelt down before her and raised the hem of her dainty garment to his lips.

"That is the attitude of my thoughts toward you," he said, in a low voice,—“always, always, upon my knees before you.”

With a slight abatement of her resentment, Dorothy moved away from him, and stood with her arm leaning upon the mantelpiece.

"You had better get up now," she said coldly, though she had been touched to the depths of her heart by that act of homage. "Some one might come to the door."

"Yes," said Sebastian, rising at once at her bidding. "Besides, this is not a very good attitude for conversation, and I have so much to say."

Dorothy was still looking coldly at him; though it must be owned that his voice, with its new accent, thrilled her. The flame of her anger had already died down, and she was finding excuses, or prepared at least to hear them, for his unusual behavior.

"For that act of mine which has offended you," said Sebastian, "I apologize with all my heart. But I think you will be willing to forgive me when you realize that it was pure joy, after the long repression, to find myself here with you, and in a position to say all that has been burning into my heart."

Dorothy was listening, with an expression which to Sebastian was enchanting; though her eyes were lowered and her countenance still grave.

"They say a woman always knows when a man loves her," he went on; "and I suppose that is the case. But, at any rate, there is no use in protestations. Words would only spoil all that I am thinking—"

He paused, hoping perhaps for a word of encouragement; but none came.

Dorothy, as if signifying that she was willing to hear whatever he might have to say, sat down in the selfsame armchair which added so pretty a touch of dignity to her figure.

"I think you must be able to guess, to see for yourself," continued Sebastian. "Almost ever since we met, this love for you has been taking possession of me. It was hard to think of anything else, and hardest of all to be near you and unable to give it expression."

It seemed to him that his words were lame and insufficient, and that there was no power in language to make that peerless figure in the chair feel and understand.

"I have none of the graces that charm women," he said; "so it used to seem to me, until lately, that I should have to be content if I could persuade you to do, what Margie tells me is common enough amongst her sex,—marry me for what external advantages I could offer."

"Margie ought to know me better than that," answered Dorothy, severely; "and to be quite sure that I should never do anything of the kind."

"Nor would I now wish you to make the attempt," said Sebastian. "That stage is past."

Dorothy, reflecting upon these words, allowed her serious eyes to study for an instant the young man's face. It was pale, but in the eyes was that look which had made him conquer

in great enterprises and overcome many difficulties. That appealed to Dorothy. She loved power; she loved the inflexible will that had kept this man silent in those family affairs, where it would have been so much easier to speak, and which had repressed those avowals on his lips with regard to herself which his eloquent eyes had spoken. She loved that slim, boyish figure, and the face that had become supremely interesting to her above all those she had ever seen. She loved, in fact, the whole personality of the man; and she was aware that she had done wisely and well in loving one who possessed the soul of a knight errant, the brain of a modern financier, and a heart of pure gold. But she wanted to wait a little to hear him protest further, and to explain what had been the meaning of his first impulsive action.

"I was going to say," she remarked, "that I could not think of marrying you at all—"

Something like a groan of dismay escaped from Sebastian as he cried:

"You could not think of marrying me! O Dorothy, is there no appeal from that cruel sentence?" His eyes were pleading, his hands outstretched as one who supplicates. "I am a beggar," he said, "asking alms."

"I had not quite finished my sentence," rejoined Dorothy, and she marvelled at her own composure. "I was going to say that I could not think of marrying you, no matter

what the temptation, unless I cared for you more than for any one in the world."

There was a world of love and hope in Sebastian's voice as he saw light breaking through the darkness.

"Dorothy," he pleaded, "is there the smallest chance that that can ever be?"

"You forget," she said calmly, "that you are still in disgrace and unforgiven."

"But you will have to forgive when you know all."

"Full knowledge," replied Dorothy, with a little laugh, "makes all things, they say, forgivable."

Sebastian approached and stood near the mantlepice, which the girl had abandoned.

"The other night," he said, "when you saw and recognized my father's portrait, I knew, of course, that you had guessed everything. I can not tell what your thoughts may have been."

"Sympathy!" she exclaimed, promptly. "That was my chief thought,—sympathy with you and everyone."

"I may claim the whole of that sweet gift," said Sebastian, "since no one else knew anything. At the time of my father's death, I became his sole confidant. On me fell the fear, suspense, anxiety. But I am not going to dwell upon that now. Thank God, it is over! But you have guessed enough to see what seemed to make my marriage impossible."

Dorothy still listened, with greater attention than ever; but the artificial calm which she had maintained was softened, and the tears were welling up into her eyes.

"I suffered a great deal," continued Sebastian; "and I had persuaded myself that, in order to keep the secret inviolate as I had promised my dead father, I should keep away even from the priest."

He paused, while Dorothy nodded comprehendingly.

"You may remember," he said, "a conversation I had with you here one day. It followed upon a word of advice spoken to me by Rosanna, our faithful old servant; and Margie also told me of the league of prayer that you had joined in with the rest, for my conversion. The scales seemed all at once to fall from my eyes. I realized that I could risk nothing by going to see the old priest who had heard my father's confession shortly before his death. I went there to-day; and, Dorothy, besides having made my peace with God, which has made me feel as happy as a child, I must tell you that the last obstacle—unless, of course, that of your will—between you and me has been removed. The first Elmira, who was my father's wife, is, as you know, dead; the second, her daughter, is found, and shall be handsomely provided for."

In her new interest and emotion, Dorothy was bending toward him, wiping away the tears

that obscured her eyes; while Sebastian resumed:

"After I had received absolution, the priest—who, I should premise, had been acquainted by my late father with the whole affair—invited me to sit down and talk matters over. At a certain point in our conversation he felt impelled to look at notes which he had been in the habit of taking, and there he found what materially affected our whole lives."

Sebastian paused for a glance at his now wholly sympathetic listener, and then hurried on:

"Singular as it may appear, that very priest had been giving a mission in a Southwestern city, and was called to see a dying woman, a non-Catholic. Why she had sent for him, and what she wanted to explain, may be guessed. But the call, though immediately answered, had come too late. The patient, whose disease was pneumonia, had become unconscious, and died two hours afterward. Her name was Sarah Elmira Johnson."

Dorothy gave a cry.

"The mother of my Elmira!"

"Yes, of *our* Elmira," corrected Sebastian, with a smile.

"But why—but how does this affect you—I mean in any new way?" demanded Dorothy.

"Because, my darling girl," cried Sebastian, almost unconsciously using the endearing epithet, "that entry in the priest's notebook

proves that Elmira the first died just six months before my father's second marriage."

"Oh, I am so glad,—*so* glad!" said Dorothy, with all the impulsiveness of her Southern nature; coming to the front and dispelling the last mist of coldness from her manner, while the tears began to chase each other down her cheeks.

"And when I left the priest," continued Sebastian, "I almost ran here. I met Mrs. Rollins on the way, and forced her to give me permission to see you and to ask you to become my wife. It was a sort of 'hold up,' but she consented to leave the matter to yourself. And so I can not help thinking there is some excuse for behaving as I did."

"Why, to be sure!" replied Dorothy. "I think anybody would have done the same under the circumstances."

"Everything having turned out so wonderfully well," said the young man, "I could not help persuading myself that I should have the same luck here, and that you would crown my happiness by consenting to marry me."

"O Sebastian," cried Dorothy, "indeed I shall be glad and proud to marry you! I think you have behaved all through like a hero,—a second St. Sebastian."

"But," said the young man, "Dorothy dearest, you would not marry a man only because he seemed to you like a hero."

"No—though that would be a great induce-

ment,—but only because I cared more for him than for any one else in the world.”

That drawing-room of Mrs. Rollins, which, with its treasures of art and its evidences of taste and culture, had hitherto seemed to Sebastian as the home of all the conventionalities and all the commonplaces, became suddenly transformed into a paradise of delight and a spot to be affectionately remembered for evermore. But amongst all the things of which these lovers talked, there was one item which may be here recorded, since it has a bearing on this narrative.

“Isn’t it strange to think,” said Sebastian, “that your Elmira turns out to be my half-sister?”

“My poor Elmira!” exclaimed Dorothy. “I wonder what she will think of all the good news I shall have to write her?”

“Letters are such very unsatisfactory things!” said Sebastian. “I really think, dearest, that we ought to bring the good news there in person. I should like to pay her a visit. I have great curiosity to see her. Of course, I can not tell her of our relationship. But, if you will come with me, my interest will seem the most natural thing in the world, since I can introduce myself by the proudest title any man could bear—that of your husband.”

“That seems premature to discuss just yet,” replied Dorothy. “I have scarcely had time to realize all that I have promised. But, in any

case, I shall have to go home first of all, and tell my dear mother and the others the astounding news."

"Ah, no!—ah, no!" said Sebastian. "I will write to your mother this very day, and you can send a letter at the same time. We shall beg her to come here, and to bring all the family, if possible, for the wedding. My mother will be delighted to receive them. Or, if this is impossible, we can go to see them on our way to—Elmira."

"Oh, I can not decide yet!" said Dorothy. "It seems so like a dream."

"Make it a blessed reality," cried Sebastian, "and do not keep Elmira and me too long from our happiness!"

XXVI.

Now, Louis, after that last conversation with Rosanna, thought it expedient to say a seasonable word to Sebastian about the subject which had been under consideration. He felt that it was due to his brother to be informed of what was being said, with the further light that the old nurse had been able to throw upon the matter; so that Sebastian might be able, perhaps, to offer some explanation and to take some steps that should lay forever the unquiet ghost of Elmira.

He went down to the warehouse, where business that day seemed more active than ever; and, standing silently on the sidewalk outside, watched the huge bales being propelled, by stalwart men, out of the doors and onto the drays, which patient, thick-legged horses were waiting to transport; while other drays and vans were being unloaded skilfully and with dispatch, their contents being drawn through the portals of the warehouse as into a vortex.

Louis let his eyes wander over the gray walls, relieved from monotony by the blue shades,—walls that had undergone no change what-

ever since that day when their late tenant had gone forth from them to return no more. Louis went in, and passed in a leisurely way from one story to another of the building, observing its various details with a new curiosity, as if he had never seen it all before. He caught glimpses of his brother, and heard his voice at divers points, directing and instructing. That slender figure and the dark-complexioned face seemed to be everywhere at once,—that voice to give its orders, calmly and without excitement; that mind to think and to govern.

Louis sat down in his brother's office to wait for him. It was only a few moments until Sebastian entered, and the Doctor's quick eye noted at once the change for the better in his appearance.

"Why, what have you been doing?" he said. "You haven't gone away. Does it mean tonics or slacking of work?"

"It means a good deal more than that," replied Sebastian, with a laugh such as Louis had not heard from him in many a day. "There is no reason why I should not tell you that, for one thing, I am going to be married."

"Married!" And through Louis' alert mind flashed the thought that only the other day he had heard a statement from Sebastian that marriage would be for himself, as well as for Margie, impossible. But he did not comment on the inconsistency. "Well, that is good news," he rejoined, "though a bit sudden.

And I need scarcely ask who is the bride elect."

"There could be but one, of course," observed Sebastian, with his wholesome-sounding laugh.

"She is very charming," observed Louis. "I congratulate you."

"I am felicitating myself every time I think of it," declared Sebastian. "I can hardly believe in my good fortune yet."

There was a pause; for that subject seemed closed by the few words that had been spoken.

"I came down here to-day," said Louis, "not like Alfred, to proffer my valuable assistance, nor yet to see how things are going on. But the place seems a very synonym for prosperity."

"Things *are* going well, I think," replied Sebastian. "As for Alfred, he has been simply pestiferous of late. He has got hold of some new idea about me, and seems to think that I am appropriating to myself more than my share of the estate."

"Why don't you tell him to go to—Halifax?"

"It would be no use: he wouldn't go; or if he did, he'd come back."

"Well," continued Louis, "as I was about to say, I came down here to-day, because I wanted a quiet place to talk to you. There seems, however, to be a good deal of noise both in the street and in the building."

"It's a rush day," rejoined Sebastian; "and, besides, we should be subject to interruption."

I am rarely left in peace for more than a few minutes at a time."

"So perhaps, after all," remarked Louis, "I had better say my say up at the house?"

"I think it would be better," agreed Sebastian. "What time will suit you?"

"This evening, if convenient."

Sebastian nodded.

"I shall be at home," he said. "And, if you can wait a bit, we can walk up town together."

"Can't do that," replied Louis. "I have to see a patient in twenty minutes."

"Come to dinner, then. Mother will be delighted. She complains that she seldom sees you. Neither Alfred nor his wife will be there. I believe there is a dinner of the Bar, or something, to-night, and Mrs. Alfred is going to hear the speeches."

"Their absence will be a great inducement," said Louis, almost viciously.

"It will be at least a change," observed Sebastian. "They dine with us or drop in almost every evening, on the plea that mother would be lonely."

"Well, I'll telephone Rosanna that she needn't prepare dinner for me; and I'll look in on a couple of patients, get a bath, and be with you about seven. But I probably won't appear till the last moment."

"All right!" said Sebastian. "We can have a smoke and a talk afterward."

If Sebastian, left alone, wondered what it

was that his brother had to say to him, he was not allowed much time for conjecture. Every moment his attention seemed to be demanded. Wilmot & Son had concentrated more than ever upon him, and especially on particularly busy days. At last, with some relief, he saw arriving the moment of departure. He had given his final instructions; the various operations of the day had been concluded; and the huge place, foregoing all its activities, prepared to resign itself to the darkness, like some busy, useful life, suddenly immersed in the shadows. When Sebastian was coming downstairs after he had made his toilet for dinner, he encountered Margie going up. She had just come in and was hastening to her room.

"I'm afraid I shall be late," she said. "I have been at a crush tea."

"Margie," replied Sebastian, pausing with his hand on the baluster, "it is not a very formal way of announcing things, but I wanted to tell you to be sure to have Dr. Dever up to dinner some evening soon. I am anxious to meet him."

Margie gazed in astonishment at her brother, reflecting that such a meeting would be exceedingly awkward.

"For I may as well blurt out the good news now as at any other time. You may marry your admirable Doctor whenever you will,—at least in so far as I am concerned."

"Sebastian, do you mean it?" cried Margie;

and in another instant she had thrown both arms around his neck.

"That's a suffocating sort of bear's hug," said Sebastian; "and I fear for my collar."

Margie, knitting her brows reflectively, was studying his face.

"But how has this come about?" she asked.

"I am not free to tell you anything more than that I have been trying to arrange things to get further information on certain affairs, and, in short, to make smooth the rosy path of Hymen for Miss Margie."

"I won't ask a single question," said Margie, determinedly.

"No," said Sebastian, "that will be the best way. And I want you to believe, little sister, that if I opposed your marriage before, I had good and substantial reason for doing so; and that it was no caprice or arbitrary exercise of authority on my part."

"I knew that all along," said Margie,—
"except for that one evil moment, when I was as bad as Mrs. Alfred."

"This is a queer place for a family conference on affairs of state," laughed Sebastian, looking around the wide hall, up at its spacious ceiling, and down again at the thick piles of carpet on the staircases. "But, since we have made it into a council chamber, I may as well tell you another great piece of news. It is all right about my own marriage, too. The same reason that blocked yours was blocking mine. And

Dorothy has promised to make me the happiest fellow on earth."

"Why, you dear old magician of a brother!" cried Margie, threatening him with another hug. "I am as delighted to hear that as about my own affair. Dorothy is really the only person I could allow you to marry. You are just going about this evening scattering happiness everywhere."

"I am on my way downstairs now to deal out a little more," declared Sebastian, his boyish laugh ringing through the corridor. "I am going to tell mother that this house may be sold whenever she likes."

"Why, she will be delighted!" said Margie. "And I used to imagine that I would be, too; but now it seems sad to think of the dear old house broken up."

Sebastian laughed.

"There's nothing in the world sad about it," he responded. "Everything is rose-colored."

Margie wondered, and was conscious of a slight feeling of disappointment; for she had always supposed her youngest brother to be devotedly attached to this family mansion, looking out upon that square which he had professed to love. She could not help an involuntary sigh, believing that his new happiness had left no room in his heart for anything else. She pursued her way upstairs, remarking that she would hurry down again, to be in time for dinner; and Sebastian went to the

drawing-room, for a few moments' talk with his mother.

He found her sitting there alone, thinking over all that had come and gone, and "especially your poor father."

"Yes," said Sebastian, "he seems to keep his place in the old house; doesn't he?"

"Every part of it is full of sad associations," replied the mother; and in her tone there was a slight hint of resentment against this son who had refused to take that fact into consideration.

Sebastian smiled in anticipation of the pleasant surprise he was about to give her. He went and stood near her, with the look on his face of affectionate interest it used to wear in the old days, before business and its preoccupations, and those other graver complexities, had cast their shadow over him. Mrs. Wilmot, glancing up at her tall son, was struck with that look of youth and happiness that had suddenly been restored to his face.

"Mother," said Sebastian, "I am sure you have been thinking very hard things of me for some time past, and apparently with reason. I have had such difficult matters to deal with! But, happily, they are all settled now. The way of the executor is hard. In future, I feel certain that your will in all important matters will be mine."

"That sounds more like my own Sebastian," said the mother, smiling at him.

"In the first place," the young man went on, "I want to tell you that this house can now be sold whenever you like."

Mrs. Wilmot could scarcely believe her ears.

"But I thought you said it was impossible?" she remarked.

"So it was at the time," said Sebastian; "but now I have been able to arrange everything. Things have straightened themselves out wonderfully, and nothing pleases me better than to be in a position at last to meet your wishes."

"I knew you would not hold out long against me, you dear, good boy!"

"I should not have held out at all, if the matter had rested with me," said Sebastian, gravely. Mrs. Wilmot looked about her, and for the first time felt a pang of regret; for this house had been so long identified with her life, and her husband had been so proud of it! She had come there as a young wife, and had thought it, at first, very grand and imposing.

"Do you know," she said, "I shall be half sorry to leave the old place, after all, and to think, perhaps, of its being demolished?"

Sebastian smiled at this bit of feminine inconsistency, which was not, however, displeasing to him.

"I don't think it will be demolished,—not for a long time, anyway," he said.

His mother looked up at him inquiringly.

"And I'll tell you why," said Sebastian,

sitting down on a low stool beside her, and taking her hand. "Because I am going to buy it and live in it myself. And that brings me to another item of news. It is something on which I want to ask your blessing and consent."

"My blessing and consent!" murmured the mother, with a sinking heart. For she knew that those words could have only one meaning. That news which was trembling upon his lips would signify that she was to lose this dear son, whom, in spite of their late estrangement, she loved best of all.

"It seems strange, mother dearest," said the young man, in the old, caressing tone of his boyhood, "that I, who so lately was your little boy, running your messages and hanging on to your skirts, should be taking a wife. But that is the case. It is the law of life,—all change and vicissitude. You know the girl I have chosen: you have seen her—Dorothy Kent. She is worthy of all the love I can give her. She is Margie's friend; she will be your daughter."

But the mother only put her handkerchief to her eyes and began to cry softly, though she pressed Sebastian's hand.

"I hope you will be very happy," the poor lady said at last. "But, oh, it breaks my heart, and I shall be so very lonely!"

"If, my own dear mother," said Sebastian, who was profoundly moved by her emotion, "it should please you better, after all, to

stay here with us, the house shall be yours, even though I should be its nominal owner."

But Mrs. Wilmot seemed to think that it would be better she should have the new house to which she had been so long looking forward. And Sebastian threw out the suggestion that perhaps Margie, whose marriage would probably take place before long, might like for the first few years to share, in company with her Doctor, the mother's new abode.

"But I thought that Margie was not to be married for a year, at least!" cried Mrs. Wilmot, in bewilderment. "I wonder she has not told me."

"She herself has heard," said Sebastian, "only a few minutes ago, upon the stairs. Everything is coming out all right at last," he added.

"Only that I am to lose my children!" said the mother.

But she was very soon engrossed with the prospect of choosing and moving into a new house, with all that such a change entailed. And she took up very warmly the idea that Margie should live with her after her marriage; while she could make visits, in turn, to each of her children. And that was, in fact, the arrangement that was made.

XXVII.

LOUIS arrived punctual to the hour, and during the progress of dinner was told all the good news of the day. Nothing seemed to please him more than the decision concerning Margie and his friend, Dr. Dever, for whom he had a sincere affection. He laughingly declared, too, that, regarding his brother's approaching marriage, he had no objection in the world to so pretty a sister-in-law.

It was then suggested that his own marriage should follow in due course. He put on a sentimental expression, so that, for the moment, every member of the company was deceived when he declared with solemnity:

"Apart from my mother, there is only one woman in the world for me, and cruel Time has set up an obstacle!"

As they looked inquiringly at him, he explained:

"That woman is Rosanna. Any other would fatally upset my digestion, and make me feel, moreover, as if the universe had turned topsyturvy."

"Rosanna will have a rival some of these

days," said the mother. "But I do hope not too soon. I should like to think that one of my children belongs entirely to me."

That was altogether the merriest and pleasantest dinner that had taken place for a long time in the old house, even allowing for the shade of melancholy that arose from so many prospective changes. It must be owned that the absence of Mrs. Alfred was felt by most of the company as an agreeable change, and that the pompous platitudes of brother Alfred could also be spared.

After dinner the two young men went away together to smoke; and Sebastian, contrary to all custom, brought his brother upstairs to that little room where, on the night preceding his death, David Wilmot had labored so hard upon that work of expiation which then engaged him. And there, where Sebastian had taken up the burden, it seemed meet that the last traces of it should be removed from his shoulders.

When they were seated and had smoked a few moments in silence, Louis said:

"It is not my habit, as you know, to pry into any one's affairs; but I have been a bit anxious of late, and you won't object if I relieve my mind by a few questions?"

"As many as you like," said Sebastian, cheerfully. He had little fear now of interrogations, and least of all from Louis, whom he could trust as himself.

"There has been, as you know, a good deal of foolish talk going round."

"I have had some inkling of it," agreed Sebastian.

"And you can guess who is chiefly to blame."

"It is not very hard," laughed Sebastian, between puffs.

"But don't you think now," suggested Louis, "that it is time to take some step to put a stop to all this chatter?"

"My dear fellow," objected Sebastian, "do you think it is worth while? Those whose opinion I value will not believe idle gossip about me; and for the rest" (he flicked the ashes off his cigar), "they are scarcely worth considering."

"That would be my own standpoint," said Louis; "only that, in view of your approaching marriage, I think you owe it to Miss Kent to silence slanderous tongues."

"Perhaps you are right there," replied Sebastian, with a gleam in his eye. "For her the best is none too good; and even the bubble, reputation, should be carefully guarded."

"And then there are, too," observed Louis, "certain circumstances that are exceptional."

"In what way?" inquired his brother.

Louis shifted uneasily in his chair before he answered. There are some things that it is hard to put into speech. Sebastian, watching him, reflected that it was in that very chair

his father had been sitting upon that last memorable night.

"I have heard lately," said Louis, "a good deal of talk about some one who is called Elmira."

Sebastian sat back in his chair.

"Yes, Elmira," he declared, "is the crux of the whole situation."

"Now," said Louis, "I am not asking any questions that you may not care to answer. But it may be well for you to know—unless indeed, as I suspect, you know already—that this Elmira appears to have had a real existence."

"She certainly had," Sebastian replied emphatically; and his brother, considerably surprised, waited while the former relapsed into silence. That silence, not devoid of emotion, continued for some moments; for Sebastian, deep in thought, was reflecting how little had all his precautions availed to keep that secrecy to the dead as absolutely inviolable as he had wished. Of course he knew that whatever had reached the public had been through the indiscretion of a gossiping and malicious woman. But how much she had made public, or what had reached his brother, he could not guess.

Here in this very room had been enacted the first scene in that drama which now seemed about to culminate so happily for all concerned. He almost expected to see his father seated again at the opposite side of the table,

and confronting him, though not in bodily form, as he had done upon that other night. One thing seemed quite certain, and therein he agreed with his brother: the talk should, if it were possible, be stopped, not only for the reason already given, but lest mischief to the good name of the dead should ensue and the real truth be made public.

"When I spoke of exceptional circumstances," said Louis, "I meant that Mrs Alfred seems to have got the thing distorted, and to represent Elmira as belonging to the present instead of to a bygone generation."

"I don't exactly understand," rejoined Sebastian. "And I would like to ask, if you don't object, from whom you received the information additional to that circulated by Mrs. Alfred."

"From Rosanna," said Louis,—a reply which to Sebastian seemed sufficiently startling. His brother briefly but clearly put before him that scene which the old nurse had so graphically described following up her finding of the photographs.

"But surely," continued Sebastian, much perturbed, "it was not from her that Mrs. Alfred got her information."

"That would be the most unlikely thing in the world, knowing Rosanna as we do," said Louis. "She spoke of the matter at all only because of her uneasiness at the gossip that Mrs. Alfred was spreading. Besides," Louis

added, after a slight pause, and with an uncomfortable laugh, "we have another proof in the extraordinary fact that Elmira has been foisted upon you."

"Upon me!" cried Sebastian, in amazement. "That is something I certainly had not heard; though I had reason to know that some kind of stories to my discredit were being circulated. But that only renders everything more complicated, and makes it imperative, too, that this gossip should be stopped."

"But," said Louis, "since we are upon the subject, and if it is a fair question, who is this Elmira?"

The question seemed to vibrate through that room; for in the answer to it, as Sebastian knew, was involved that whole tragedy which had throbbed and palpitated within these narrow limits. There was another pause, during which Sebastian was being torn by a scruple. Since Louis knew so much, and, with his keen wits, had probably surmised a great deal more, would it not be better that he should know all, or at least so much as would make him a valuable auxiliary in the work of preserving whatever secrecy might still be maintained?

"There is nothing to gain," he said, "in concealing from you now a fact, which I should have been quite willing to share with you from the first. No doubt, from what Rosanna said, you have been able to make a tolerably

shrewd guess that Elmira was father's first wife."

Louis nearly sprang from his chair in astonishment. That was an announcement for which he had not been prepared; and Sebastian was heartily glad that, much as he trusted this second eldest brother, he had not to let him know that circumstance which gave the matter its darkest complexion. In that respect at least he could be faithful to the dead, since, save the old priest, and Dorothy through her discovery, none need ever know of the wrong which David Wilmot had believed himself to be doing to both women.

"The silence which I have kept," said Sebastian, "was in consequence of a promise made to the dead, and imposed upon me, as I thought, by father's tacit wish. That promise I have kept in so far as I was able. There are certain painful circumstances in connection with that marriage which it is best should be forgotten. Father left me a detailed account of all, or nearly all, that happened. Those omissions have been supplied from other sources."

"You may believe me, Sebastian," cried Louis, "I never was so much astonished in my life!"

"We are apt to forget," said Sebastian, with a faint smile, "that our parents are human, and may be subject to the follies, even the crimes, incidental to the race."

"Were there children of this marriage?" Louis inquired next.

"One daughter, whom I have managed to find, strangely enough, through the instrumentality of Dorothy."

"Of Miss Kent?" said Louis. "Does *she*, too, know all this?"

"By a singular chain of circumstances," said Sebastian, "she was companion to this very Elmira the second, the daughter, and had heard the whole story,—though, of course, quite unaware that it had any connection with us until she recognized father's portrait in the dining-room the other night, from a photograph in her possession."

"By George!" cried Louis, "I never heard anything so remarkable! And I suppose that was the reason you objected to Margie's marriage?"

"Yes, until I was quite sure that everything was regular. And that was likewise my objection to the sale of the house; for father had strictly enjoined upon me not to sell it until Elmira's daughter should be found."

Sebastian did not think it necessary to explain that it was also for the wife, who his father had believed might still be surviving, the restriction had been made."

"Well, all I can say," observed Louis, drawing a deep breath, "is that you have had a confoundedly hard time of it, in addition to the enormous responsibilities of the business.

And it is damnable to think that that woman, with her meddlesome tongue, very nearly put the entire story onto the market."

"I hope, indeed," said Sebastian, "that she has not found out and told too much. One of my anxieties is lest the story, perhaps in some garbled fashion, should ever reach mother or Margie."

"We must find out at once from this woman what she knows, and shut her up, if we have to send her to Siberia," replied Louis. "I think you had better let *me* deal with that end of the matter. You are somewhat of a coward where women are concerned."

Sebastian slightly smiled at that remark.

"I will leave it to you with pleasure; though I am convinced she will not be nearly so much interested in spreading the story—apart from other considerations—once she has discovered that it does not concern me. But, of course, we can not tell her the true state of the case."

"We must tell her just enough to shut her mouth."

"Not violating the confidence of the dead," said Sebastian, firmly.

"No," agreed Louis. "That, of course, must be kept sacred."

Meanwhile Mr. and Mrs. Alfred had already returned from the Bar dinner; for the brothers did not realize how long their conference had been protracted. They suddenly heard, to their surprise, a tapping at the door of the room in

which they sat, and the voice of Mrs. Alfred demanding admittance. Louis muttered an execration under his breath; but Sebastian, arising, went to the door, which the visitor had already opened, thrusting in her head.

"Oh, you naughty pair of boys!" she said. "Your mother is quite distressed that she has scarcely seen Louis, who comes here so seldom. But Alfred suggested, and I quite agreed with him, that it was probably Sebastian's fault, selfishly monopolizing him."

Louis also had risen to his feet as she entered, and he saluted her grimly.

"Oh, is that you, Mrs. Alfred? Your dinner must have come to an end early. But we shall be very glad to have a word with you, if you will sit down for a few moments."

She took the chair which Sebastian offered her, looking about her half curiously, half uneasily. It was not like Louis to extend such an invitation.

"If you don't mind the smoke," said Sebastian, hastening to open the window.

He remained there, with a certain distaste to see the woman thus brought to bay; while Louis faced her. He caught glimpses of the square outside as he stood; the electric light was making eerie shadows upon its broad paths and its beds, wherein the grass was brown and dry and sere. His thoughts, in swift retrospection, went back to that afternoon when his father had speculated upon his marriage,

which had then seemed so remote and shadowy a contingency, and on the kind of wife he should be likely to choose, and how afterward he had stood upon the brown stone steps at the front door, and, looking out upon that familiar scene, had watched the white butterflies. Presently his attention was called to what the other two were saying in the room.

"Both Sebastian and I," said Louis, "are anxious to know the meaning of this talk about a person named Elmira. We thought you might be able to throw some light on the subject."

Mrs. Alfred, surprised and disconcerted, flushed to a delicate pink, her eyes narrowing into slits, though the smile still hovered about her thin lips.

"Why, I should have thought," she said sweetly, "that our dear Sebastian could have given you more information on that subject than any one else."

"So he can," said Louis, composedly; "but he has not seen fit to make it public."

"It would not be, perhaps, a pretty story for Dorothy."

"I should prefer," said Sebastian, turning suddenly from the window, but still gravely courteous—"that is, if you don't mind,—that Miss Kent's name should be left out of this discussion."

"Why, yes, if you prefer," said Mrs. Alfred. "And that reminds me that I have not yet

had an opportunity of offering you my congratulations."

"Thank you!" replied Sebastian.

"You took us all so much by surprise; but, then, you are always so very reticent."

"Which brings us back to the point," said Louis, "that I wish everybody else had been equally reticent. But what we are particularly interested in hearing just now is what you happen to know about Elmira?"

Mrs. Alfred looked down, affecting reluctance.

"I would rather not,—indeed I should rather not," she said.

"I am afraid," said Louis, "we shall have to ask you to overcome that reluctance, and to speak out plainly. The matter is vital."

"Do you really want me to tell?" said Mrs. Alfred, rising and confronting Sebastian, with a curious light in her eyes.

"I most certainly do," said Sebastian.

"Then I will speak at last, I will submit my proof; and I challenge Louis,—I appeal to any fair-minded person to say if the proof be not sufficient."

"As there are no fair-minded persons here," said Louis, sarcastically, "except ourselves, such an appeal is superfluous."

"But with all your mockery," said Mrs. Alfred, "you who, at least, are of irreproachable conduct and a credit to the family, will have to admit that this brother who has been raised up over us all by the unjust will of his

father, has become involved in some affair that he strives to gloss over by his affectation of reticence."

"A reticence which you would have done well to imitate," said Louis, his keen eyes regarding that soul which she had thus laid bare, with its petty jealousy, its meanness, and its malice. "Of course it would not be our province to take you to task for anything you might have seen fit to do or say. But this is a matter that may involve the most serious consequence, if this slanderous gossip that has arisen can not be checked. So when you have been kind enough to tell us what you know of this woman, we shall have to ask you, whenever possible, to deny such rumors concerning Sebastian, or with regard to this Elmira, as may be in circulation."

"I shall never deny what is true," said Mrs. Alfred, suddenly snatching from her neck a little bag of silk, from which she drew a slip of paper. "Let Sebastian deny, if he can, that this belongs to him."

She thrust it into Louis' hand; but he, without so much as a glance at it, passed it to Sebastian. The latter, much surprised, took and examined it deliberately. It was yellow with age, split at the creases, and seeming, in fact, on the point of falling to pieces. He opened it with care, and read what would have filled him with dismay but a short time previously. The writing was such as might

have belonged to an illiterate person; the words were few, but such as to suggest a perilously close guess at the truth. He wondered that it had not been perfectly clear to the woman's acute mind, and could only rejoice, with deep thankfulness, at the strange mistake into which she had fallen and her singular obtuseness. For, as he reflected, the very appearance of that paper might have shown the absurdity of connecting it with himself.

XXVIII.

MRS. ALFRED was watching Sebastian with a smile that was cruel and malignant, though she was at the same time a little breathless; for there had been certainly a burning of her bridges with a vengeance and an open declaration of hostility. She was hoping to see the young man flinch when confronted with what seemed the evidence of his guilt before his upright and sternly-judging brother. But Sebastian's face showed no other emotion than surprise. Half-frightened at her act and its possible consequences, she was moved to explain:

"You must not blame me, Sebastian. You see, I have been forced into showing the paper by the unwarrantable proceedings of this evening."

Sebastian's voice was quite unmoved, and as courteous as ever when he replied:

"On the contrary, I am exceedingly obliged to you for letting us see this singular bit of evidence concerning something in which Louis and I are very much interested. And perhaps you will do us a greater favor still, and state when, how, and from whom you obtained this scrap of paper."

"From yourself!" cried Mrs. Alfred, feeling

that, somehow, things were not going to her liking,—“here at this very door, on the night following your father’s death.”

Sebastian remembered at once how he had met her, and how he had feared her when he was striving to escape into solitude. He saw that on examining his father’s papers, this morsel must have fallen to the floor, or adhered in some way to his clothing. When he had stepped forth into the dim light of the hall, he might have dropped it unnoticed, and right in the enemy’s path. He felt that he could not be sufficiently thankful that her prejudice against himself had blinded her to other things. Perhaps even then Mrs. Alfred expected to see him tear the slip of paper into pieces, or conceal it, with some trivial excuse, in the depths of his pocket. But instead he returned it again to Louis.

“No doubt,” he said, “this was the origin of those stories that have been circulated. Evidently this bit of writing has some relation to the matter we were discussing this evening.”

Never was angry disappointment more clearly visible upon a human countenance than upon that of Mrs. Alfred at this moment. Sebastian’s composure declared to her more forcibly than argument either that she had been in some mortifying way mistaken or that he was determined to brazen it out and to rise triumphant over this new complication.

Louis was meanwhile examining the paper, from which his accusing eyes were presently raised to his sister-in-law's face.

"I hope," he said, "you have not been foolish and criminal enough to show this thing to any one."

"No," replied Mrs. Alfred,—“not even to Alfred. I really was unwilling to disturb his mind.”

"It's just as well you refrained from so doing. The shock might have been injurious to his nervous system; and if he had drawn the same inference as yourself, he would have been certain to make himself ridiculous."

These were severe words, but Louis was thoroughly indignant.

"Now," he went on, "I am going to tell you just enough of this matter to let you see how great is the danger you have escaped for yourself and the rest of the family, and at the same time what a grievous wrong you did Sebastian on a most improbable assumption."

So keen was Mrs. Alfred's mortification, so cruel her disappointment, that she felt as if she could have sunk through the floor; for she, and not Sebastian, was the criminal, self-condemned of the most inexcusable folly and indiscretion, if nothing worse, in the eyes of that righteous judge. Sebastian, unwilling to witness her confusion, turned away again to the window; while Louis gave the words of

explanation which he deemed necessary to stop the woman's tongue.

"Now, let me tell you, in the first place," he said, "that this name of Elmira is one that must not be mentioned ever again, either in public or private. Sebastian has had untold trouble, and has lifted a burden from the rest of us, in striving to keep secret the history of this woman. She was of the humblest birth, and married to a relative of ours. She was dead before we were born, and so can not be of interest to any one of this generation. The appearance of that paper might have told you as much. Altogether, you can see for yourself that the story was not one which should have been made public, and that any rash talk might even yet subject the family not only to mortification and inconvenience but to something much worse."

During this explanation Sebastian looked anxious and uneasy. He feared that Louis was telling too much, and that the keen wits of the woman might supply the missing links in such a story. But Louis was determined that Sebastian should be fully exonerated; for his robust common-sense saw no reason why one man's reputation should suffer for another's; and he was supremely anxious to stop Mrs. Alfred's tongue, and to induce her to undo, if possible, some of the mischief that she had done.

The latter stood there now with but one

desire—to escape from the presence of these men by whom she had been so bitterly mortified, who had witnessed her defeat. In her mind were conflicting sentiments—shame, fear at the danger which she had escaped, for the desire of family aggrandizement was one of her most predominant traits; a certain remorse for the injury which she had inflicted upon Sebastian, since it must be owned, she would have been incapable of inventing a deliberate calumny against him; but, withal, anger that he had emerged more triumphantly than ever from this crisis which had threatened his good name and his supremacy in the family.

Presently Sebastian came forward, extending to her the olive branch of peace, together with his hand.

“You see now that it has all been a mistake,” he said,—“perhaps a natural one on your part. And, as for me, it is easy to live down whatever harm may have been done.”

“Why, of course, you dear boy!” said Mrs. Alfred, seizing with effusion the offered hand; though in her eyes was still the light of anger, and in her heart a greater rage than ever against this always victorious younger brother. “It was so foolish of me. Of course, if I had consulted Alfred, it never would have happened; and, indeed, I only hinted at the matter to one or two intimate friends, without giving any details, or showing that wretched bit of

paper. And I am so afraid now that you will never forgive me."

"As I hope to be forgiven," answered Sebastian.

His eyes met hers, smilingly and frankly. He felt that he could well afford to pardon everything; and he opened the door for her when, with an incoherent murmur of excuse, she fled from the room.

"I hope that matter is settled forever," said Louis, grimly. "I think the argument of self-interest, the appeal to family pride, clinched it."

"And I hope," answered Sebastian, "she has not heard too much."

"No more than was necessary."

"I felt rather like an executioner," said Sebastian, "during the whole performance."

"And I like a surgeon performing a necessary operation."

After which the two young men descended to the drawing-room, where they were both struck with the cheerful equanimity with which Mrs. Alfred had resumed her ordinary place in the circle. She hovered about her "dear Mrs. Wilmot," who, as usual, was appealing to Caroline as to her chief support and right-hand woman; and she even darted honeyed smiles and glances at the brothers, as though that scene in the room above had never taken place.

They found Alfred bursting with self-

importance, and striving to repeat from memory as many extracts as possible from the speech he had delivered at the dinner. To the ill-concealed disgust of Louis, he slapped Sebastian on the back and declared that he did not think the head of the Wilmot firm half appreciated his good fortune in having so distinguished a member of the Bar as his adviser. That heavy pleasantry, which concealed his real opinion, exasperated Louis; though Sebastian received it with a smile, and a humorous look from his half-shut eyes.

"That fellow," Louis said, when Alfred had passed on, "grows more asinine every day. I won't be able to stand him much longer, but shall have to rush at him with my lancet and prick the bubble of his self-conceit."

"That would be an operation beyond even your skill," responded Sebastian. "So perhaps it is as well to let him go on harmlessly blowing his own and the family trumpet, assisted by his wife."

Suddenly from the other side of the room, like an echo, came the thin voice of Mrs. Alfred:

"Mother was just saying—and *you* know, Margie,—how absolutely correct Alfred always is in his judgments."

Louis heaved a sigh.

"That is the light behind the transparency," he said. "As long as that is there, the blubber will go on fancying itself a moon."

Margie was, for once, however, in agreement with her sister-in-law. Radiant with happiness herself, she could forgive—since she knew nothing of the graver offences—those sins on the part of Alfred and his wife, which seemed small now when the dismemberment of the family was imminent.

Mrs. Wilmot, on her part, seemed rather bewildered by the various items of news which she had heard, with startling suddenness, that day. But in the main she was full of pleasurable excitement at the prospect of the choosing and the furnishing of a new house, Margie's trousseau, and probably at no distant date a double wedding.

Sebastian meanwhile had disappeared momentarily into the dining-room, to snatch a surreptitious glance at a photograph of herself which Dorothy had that day given him. As he restored it to his pocket, his eyes, looking upward, met the gaze of his pictured father upon the wall. It now seemed smiling and benignant. Portraits have their moods as well as living people; only they are the effect of light falling in a certain way, or the reflex of the mental attitude of those who confront them.

While Sebastian was absent from the room, Mrs. Wilmot heard Louis say to Margie, with an emphasis that mildly surprised her:

"I don't think any one of us, except perhaps you, has fully appreciated the stuff of which

Sebastian is made. I begin to know him, and I am quite ready to take off my hat to him, now, that in a sense, we are about to lose him."

"Oh," cried the mother, with a suggestion of tears in her voice, "we are not going to lose him! He is going to live right here in the old house, and to make it a meeting-house for us all."

"Why, that," said Sebastian, entering through the pillars in time to catch this observation, "will be my dearest wish and Dorothy's!"

And so the old house, upon that memorable occasion, had given symptoms of awaking from its long lethargy, and undergoing that law of change inherent in houses no less than in people. And, indeed, it has been so often remarked as to have become a truism that once the Great Enchanter has set foot across a threshold, he sweeps away with relentless broom not only the cobwebs, but the sunbeams that have been playing in amongst them.

About an hour later Sebastian returned to the silent room above. He felt that there was yet some business to be transacted, a final mission to be performed. There where he had taken up the burden, it was fitting that he should lay it down; there where he had pledged himself to silence, it was fitting that he should render that silence in some sort irrevocable by destroying the witnesses to the past. He opened the safe and took from it that pitiful

confession upon which his father had been engaged when stricken by the hand of Death, and also the instructions concerning the arrangements to be made for Elmira or for her child. He once more read them all over, sitting down beside that table where he had sat upon that previous evening. Again it seemed to him as if a portly figure were occupying the opposite chair, and that heavy-lidded eyes were gazing into his own.

"Father," said Sebastian, addressing this phantom of his mind as though it had really been there, "your instructions are being carried out to the letter, as far as circumstances have made it possible; and the silence that I promised to keep has been broken only where it became unavoidable. It shall be kept now for evermore."

Near by there was a large metal urn wherein flowers had once been planted. Into that receptacle Sebastian dropped all the papers, including the bit that had been rescued from Mrs. Alfred. Setting a match to them, he watched each separate sheet leap into flame, with the writing showing at first distinct, so that he could distinguish the sentences; each charred presently into fiery red, and then sank into dull ashes. When Sebastian had seen them all reduced to finest powder, it seemed to him that he was a free man once more,—free to enjoy the life of peace and love and happiness that lay outstretched before him.

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